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**Iranian Cinema in Long Shot**

**by**

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## **Summary**

This thesis aims to facilitate a broader understanding of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, by way of an analysis of the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, and the various relationships between these two cinemas. Thus far no significant attempt has been made to consider these two cinemas in relation to each other. This thesis therefore represents a significant contribution to this line of research. Along the way it addresses several key concepts of long-standing importance in film studies, such as notions of art cinema, authorship and national cinema, in particular how such concepts have been used as a means of studying the New Iranian Cinema. Exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking represents a challenge to traditional understandings of these concepts. The first chapter therefore examines how the New Iranian Cinema has been received and constructed as an archetypal 'art cinema' in Europe and North America, in addition to how this cinema invites, at the same time as it resists, such interpretations. Thereafter follows a consideration of Iranian émigré filmmaking across Europe and North America, and how it has changed over the past thirty years, gradually shifting from an exclusively exilic to a pan-diasporic outlook. Chapters three and four are individual case studies of Iranian émigré filmmakers Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless respectively. As two of Iran's most important and influential pre-revolutionary filmmakers, the works of Naderi and Saless represent not only interesting divergences from the evolutionary understanding of Iranian émigré cinema outlined in the second chapter, but also form two of the most compelling links between the New Iranian Cinema, and its exilic and diasporic counterpart. This thesis concludes by arguing for a more flexible and open-ended conception of national cinema more generally, as well as more comprehensive, nuanced and deterritorialised understanding of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking.



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## Introduction

My introduction to Iranian cinema, in the year 1999, will be similar I imagine to many a non-Iranian's introduction to this cinema; namely, via the films of Abbas Kiarostami. In my case, the film in question was *Zir-e Derakhtan-e Zeytun/Through the Olive Trees* (1994, Iran/France). Upon my first viewing of this film I knew nothing of its director, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and very little of the country Iran itself. I was equally ignorant of the fact that the film was the third and apparently final part of a loosely grouped series of films, including its two predecessors *Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast?/Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987, Iran) and *Zendegi va Digar Hich/Life and Nothing More* aka *And Life Goes On...* (1991, Iran), based in and around the villages of Koker and Poshteh in northern Iran. I was aware however after viewing the film that it was quite different from any film I had ever seen before, though in truth I had struggled to engage with the film outside of its central focus on the budding relationship between its two main characters, Hossein and Tahereh. The famed final shot of the film especially, which shows the two would-be lovers walking through a field in extreme long shot, moving further and further into the distance to the strains of 'Concerto for Oboe and Strings' by Domenico Cimarosa, until they become two tiny dots on screen, left a lasting impression on me. I shall return to this shot in the following chapter, but for the time being it suffices to say that the film's oblique manner of conveying the nature of Tahereh's response to Hossein's incessant marriage proposals, of saying everything and nothing at the same time as it were, was particularly striking in its audacious minimalism.

This single shot, or rather my reaction to it, in a sense forms the basis for this entire thesis. My considerable difficulty in following the film overall was in no small part due to its beguiling mixture of fact and fiction, its repetitive and non-linear mode of narration, as well as its complex film-within-a film structure (which I eventually learned was an even more complex film-within-a-film-within-a-film *mise-en-abyme* structure). These features I soon discovered were characteristic of many of Kiarostami's other works, and of many post-revolutionary Iranian films in general. It was my desire to better understand this new, unfamiliar style of filmmaking that led me to watch more of Kiarostami's films, which in turn led me to watch many more award-winning

films from Iran. This in turn led me to seek out other Iranian films (including those made before the revolution) that were not quite so fortunate as to receive international recognition, funding or distribution. Perhaps foremost amongst these films were, significantly, those directed by Sohrab Shahid Saless, which in turn led to my discovery of Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora. With each successive stage on this cinematic journey I have moved further away from my original meeting point with the New Iranian Cinema, further away from the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees*. Yet at the same time I was moving closer towards a better appreciation of this shot, of Kiarostami's films in general, and of the exact nature of my first encounter with the New Iranian Cinema itself.

On the one hand I was simply going through a phase in my life where I was voraciously trying to consume as many films and discover as many 'new', interesting cinemas as I possibly could. On the other hand, there was a conscious desire on my part to gain a better understanding of Kiarostami's films, and a better overall perspective of Iranian filmmaking, so as to be able to place the New Iranian Cinema within its various contexts, which is perhaps the overriding concern of this thesis. For as my own knowledge of the New Iranian Cinema has expanded over the past several years, so has the amount of literature on the topic, especially following Kiarostami's victory at the 1997 Cannes Film Festival with *Ta'm-e guilass/Taste of Cherry* (1997, Iran/France). Since then a variety of studies have emerged, from those examining broadly the social, cultural and political significance of the New Iranian Cinema, both internationally and domestically (most notably, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, edited by Richard Tapper), to publications focusing on the works of particular filmmakers (such as Eric Egan's *Films of Makhmalbaf: Cinema, Politics and Culture in Iran*). Despite the far-reaching scope of these studies however, for even the most ardent of foreign cinema enthusiasts, Iranian cinema remains largely synonymous with the films of Kiarostami. It is usually defined moreover, solely by those films made following the revolution in 1979, or to be more exact, following the success of Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* at the 1989 Locarno Film Festival. This is despite the fact that the beginnings of the so-called Iranian 'new wave' can be traced as far back as the early 1960s, in particular to Farough Farrokhzad's *Khaneh Siah Ast/The House is Black* (Iran, 1963).

The reasons for this are numerous, and are interlinked to a considerable extent. Firstly, and perhaps foremost among these reasons, is the way in which post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been received as a quintessential 'art' cinema in Europe and North America. Like many European cinemas in the aftermath of the Second World War, following the social and political upheaval of the 1979 revolution Iranian cinema also experienced an artistic revival, along with a commensurate rise in international prestige. One of the effects of these various cinematic resurgences however, is that in most instances the rich filmmaking traditions and influences that preceded them are frequently overlooked. Indeed in Iran's case they are not so much overlooked as they are virtually forgotten. More often than not the 1979 revolution is perceived as a catalyst for, rather than an interruption of, Iranian cinema's creative renaissance. As a result, many pre-revolutionary films which serve as precursors to the best examples of contemporary Iranian filmmaking are excluded from consideration, simply because they fall outwith the restrictive timeline artificially imposed upon the evolution of the so-called 'New' Iranian Cinema.

Secondly, there has been an inordinate focus upon an elite group of internationally acclaimed Iranian *auteurs* (Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf being foremost among these), which is also counterproductive to a wider, more nuanced, inclusive appreciation of contemporary Iranian filmmaking. Indeed the emphasis on individual directors so prevalent in much of the writing on the New Iranian Cinema is also heavily informed by notions of authorship that are themselves intimately bound up with, and derived from, traditional concepts of art cinema.

Thirdly, there has been little attempt made to account for the emergence over the past three decades of a prolific and diverse Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, produced not only by second-generation Iranian *émigrés*, but also by prominent pre-revolutionary filmmakers such as Saleh, Amir Naderi, Susan Taslimi and Parviz Kimiavi. In this respect Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema*, an immense analytical overview of exilic and diasporic filmmaking in general, is important insofar as it sheds light on the existence of a diffuse and itinerant Iranian cinema produced outside of Iran by filmmakers living and working in exile and diaspora. The existence of such a cinema represents a significant challenge, not only to the historical and geographical integrity of the New Iranian Cinema, once again as it has been constructed as an archetypal 'art'



cinema within Europe and North America, but also to traditional methods of organising national cinemas along purely geographical boundaries.

The overall perception of the New Iranian Cinema in Europe and North America therefore, is artistically, historically and geographically blinkered. By transposing it into the framework of European art cinema, the New Iranian Cinema has been gradually removed and cut off from the particular contexts not only wherein it has developed, but also in which it presently resides, in relation to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema on the one hand, and Iranian filmmaking in exile and diaspora on the other. To a certain extent the term *New Iranian Cinema* is itself reflective of this transposition, and of the severance of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema from its historical roots and other contemporary manifestations, serving as it does to impose an indeterminate period of artistic relevancy upon this cinema, dictating certain avenues of discussion while it restricts others.

Indeed, there is a sense in which the New Iranian Cinema has been a victim of its own success. For as the international profile of the New Iranian Cinema has gradually increased, so too have the number of international co-productions between Iran and other countries. Since *Where is the Friend's House?* for instance, nearly all of Kiarostami's subsequent films have been co-financed by French partners. As Shohini Chaudhuri has recently noted, international co-productions, often conceived as a collaborative means of countering the apparent global dominance of Hollywood cinema, are frequently misrepresentative of the sum total of the cinematic output of the particular countries involved. These disparities furthermore are often carried over into an academic context relatively unchallenged:

International co-productions also contribute to uneven power relations; for example, Middle Eastern films co-produced with European partners often obtain international video or repertory distribution, while mainstream local production often remains unseen by foreign audiences. Film studies has yet to address properly the extent to which current critical coverage manifests the inequalities of global film distribution.<sup>1</sup>

International co-productions, somewhat ironically, can thus serve to skew the overall picture of Iranian filmmaking, by actually restricting the variety of Iranian films made available to foreign audiences around the world. Traditionally, one of the most common ways of countering such misperceptions and imbalances has been to focus on popular indigenous cinema within a

given country. Such an approach however, is not so easily available to myself as a non-Iranian. Indeed one aspect of contemporary Iranian filmmaking that is conspicuous by its absence in this thesis is 'popular' cinema within Iran, or what Chaudhuri would call "mainstream local production", though this definition does not account for popular foreign cinema. The disparities between art cinema and popular cinema, and their specificity (or lack thereof rather) to the Iranian context, will be addressed at greater length in the first chapter. At this early stage however I would simply draw the reader's attention to the title of this thesis, which as well as referring to the wider, more comprehensive panorama of Iranian cinema that I aim to delineate, in addition to the autobiographical information contained in the opening paragraphs above, also hints at my own critical distance from this cinema as non-Iranian. Which is not to say that I am necessarily any more or less qualified than any Iranian to comment upon this cinema (many Iranians have found Kiarostami's films just as challenging and problematic as I have for instance). Rather it is to recognise that there are definite limits to my own knowledge of what is ultimately for me, a 'foreign' cinema. I am after all, a *kharji* (Farsi for 'foreigner'). In this respect, the title of this thesis is also intended to evoke memories of Hamid Dabashi's acutely personal and in-depth study of Iranian cinema, *Close Up – Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*. The title *Iranian Cinema in Long Shot* by contrast points towards to my own status as an outsider.

It is this very status however that hopefully enables me to bring a different perspective to the study of the New Iranian Cinema, an area of research that has thus far been dominated, for better or for worse, by the writings of Iranian academics working in the 'West', and a perspective that would most likely not be possible had I grown up watching Iranian films. Far from wishing to define my research in opposition to Dabashi's work however, if anything this thesis can hopefully be understood as existing *in relation* to Dabashi's work, as well as Naficy's, though I certainly take issue with many of their arguments throughout.

The central aim of this thesis therefore is to recontextualise the New Iranian Cinema, or to consider rather what happens to the concept of the New Iranian Cinema when it is viewed in relation to exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking. What transformations, if any, does the concept of the New Iranian Cinema undergo when considered in such a light? Not only that, but what

implications does such a consideration have for our understanding of several key theoretical paradigms within film studies, such as art cinema, authorship and national cinema, in particular as they have been employed and/or deployed as a means of engaging with post-revolutionary Iranian cinema? Given the evident concern of this thesis with re-evaluating certain theoretical paradigms as they have been used traditionally in film studies, it is perhaps unsurprising that the means by which I attempt to answer the above questions are methodologically differentiated from each other throughout. This diversity is also reflective of the sheer heterogeneity and eclectic nature of the body of films considered in this thesis.

The first chapter therefore examines how the New Iranian Cinema has been constructed as an 'art' cinema in Europe and North America. This has been achieved to a great extent by frequent and largely superficial analogies with European art cinema, most notably the French New Wave. Accusations of pandering to Western tastes for Third World exoticism and a 'cinema of poverty' aside, in what ways do post-revolutionary Iranian films lend themselves on an aesthetic level to their repositioning within a European art cinema framework? How and to what extent is this at odds with the Iranian government's own attempts to 'Islamize' Iranian cinema following the 1979 revolution? How have Iranian filmmakers resisted the attempts by foreign audiences and their own government respectively, to categorically define their films as examples of either an exemplary 'alternative' art cinema on the one hand, or as examples of an ideologically infused 'Islamic' cinema on the other?

Chapter two by contrast examines the development of Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora. What are the connections between this cinema and the New Iranian Cinema, besides the aforementioned fact many of the exilic and diasporic filmmakers in question were important figures in pre-revolutionary Iran? Indeed what are connections between all of these filmmakers themselves? For although many of them originally hail from Iran, their films manifest many thematic and stylistic differences, as well as contrasting visions of the experience of displacement. In what ways is it possible therefore, and more importantly how useful is it, to conceive of all their films as a larger, collective body of work, one that is undoubtedly riddled with contradictions? Finally, what becomes of the concept of the New Iranian Cinema as a national



cinema, and the very concept of national cinema itself, when we begin to conceive of Iranian *filmmaking* in such a deterritorialised manner?

Chapters three and four, once again by contrast, are largely auteurist in nature, focusing on the films of Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless respectively. These chapters are intended to provide a counterpoint to the methodological approach adopted in chapters one and two. In what ways do the individual oeuvres of these two filmmakers, the former based in Germany, the latter in New York, resist a purely or straightforwardly exilic and/or diasporic reading? How and to what extent is the concept of authorship conducive to a better understanding of the films of Naderi and Saless, in contrast to the ways in which it is not necessarily conducive to a better understanding of the films of a director such as Kiarostami? By posing such questions I hope to guard against the dangers of homogenisation and essentialisation, of reducing the sheer wealth of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking to merely one level meaning, while further exploring the links between the New Iranian Cinema and two of Iran's most influential pre-revolutionary filmmakers.

This thesis therefore does not exactly strive to break new ground in terms of the theories it explores or any of the methodologies it employs. Many of the issues raised and the concepts addressed below have long-established traditions in film studies. What is innovative I would maintain however, is the way in which this thesis attempts to bring together the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora; or if not bring them together entirely, then at the very least bring to light and examine some of the links between these two cinemas. To consider, in short, what a view of Iranian cinema in long shot might look like. Six years have passed after all, since my initial viewing of *Through the Olive Trees*, and my knowledge of Iranian cinema is still growing, and will never be completely exhaustive. There will always be some new or old film or filmmaker waiting to be discovered, always some aspect of Iranian cinema's past, present and future that will inevitably slip through the cracks in my apprehension. This thesis therefore in more ways than one represents a work in progress, a momentary (albeit wordy) snapshot of my constantly evolving understanding of Iranian cinema, in all its various manifestations.

**Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri, *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, The Middle East, East Asia and South Asia*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 3-4.

## **Chapter 1 – Putting the 'New' in the New Iranian Cinema: post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as art cinema**

In art-cinema terms (though Americans don't know it yet), we are living in the Age of Kiarostami, as we once did in the Age of Godard.<sup>1</sup>

(Philip Lopate)

In *Through the Olive Trees*, the Iranian director [Abbas Kiarostami] has some serious cinematic fun in the manner of Truffaut's *Day for Night*.<sup>2</sup>

(Stephen Holden)

Kiarostami, le Magnifique!<sup>3</sup>

(*Cahiers du Cinéma*)

There is a scene at the beginning of *Bad Ma ra Khahad Bord*/*The Wind Will Carry Us* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999, Iran/France), when members of the film crew who are travelling to the Kurdish village of Siah Darreh – for the purpose of recording an elderly woman's impending funeral – remark to their young guide, the village schoolboy Farzad, as they approach the mountainside village for the first time: "What a beautiful village!... Yes, it's very beautiful... You've hidden it well."

"We haven't hidden it!" exclaims Farzad in reply, somewhat defensively. "The ancestors built it here."

This exchange between the members of the Tehran-based film crew and Farzad, as brief as it is, in certain respects serves as a metaphor for the reception of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema in Europe and North America. For instance, the film crew initially comment upon the picturesqueness and secludedness of Siah Darreh. In a similar fashion, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has received much praise for its visually pleasing and exotic portrayals of Iran and its people, and has been met with great interest due to its unfamiliarity and apparent esotericism. As Farzad's response indicates however, Siah Darreh and its inhabitants possess a sense of history and centeredness that exposes the presumptuous and decidedly metropolitan attitude of the film crew. Likewise, Iranian cinema has a rich pre-revolutionary tradition that is largely ignored by Eurocentric writers in the 'West', and which belies the simplicity and predictability of the label 'New Iranian Cinema'.

It is by no means accidental that such an interpretation may be construed from a film that explores the ethical complexities of a Tehran film crew's decision to document a mourning ritual practiced by Iran's minority Kurdish population. Indeed it seems particularly appropriate given that the growing international profile of its director, Abbas Kiarostami, has been so inextricably bound up with the success of the New Iranian Cinema itself. For since its gradual rise to worldwide prominence following the success of *Where is the Friend's House?* at the 1989 Locarno Film Festival – an event preceded to an extent by the success of *Davandeh/The Runner* (Amir Naderi, 1985, Iran) at the 1985 Nantes Three Continents Festival – the New Iranian Cinema has been regarded and portrayed overwhelmingly as a 'minor' national art cinema, in the sense that it has been consistently championed as an alternative to mainstream Hollywood cinema. Indeed, as the quotes that open this chapter are intended to illustrate, since its emergence on the international film scene the New Iranian Cinema has been written about and celebrated in such a way that explicitly ties it to other European art cinemas, most notably the French New Wave. Since the emergence of the Italian neo-realist movement of the 1940s indigenous European art cinema has constantly been viewed as a way of countering the cultural and economic hegemony of Hollywood cinema. The New Iranian Cinema therefore currently finds itself in a somewhat anomalous position previously occupied by the likes of Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, New German Cinema, and to a lesser extent so-called Fifth Generation Chinese Cinema.

Analogies between the New Iranian Cinema and European art cinema, as this chapter shall argue, are by no means unfounded, and moreover are frequently enlightening. They are nevertheless reflective of a wider, more suspect strategy on the part of audiences, critics and academics in Europe and North America alike, to appropriate the New Iranian Cinema as their own, and hold it up as some kind of exemplary art cinema alternative to mainstream Hollywood cinema. Indeed as Laura Mulvey has observed, with reference to the increasing popularity of Abbas Kiarostami's films among art cinema critics and audiences: "[A]s Kiarostami's movies have appeared, foreign art-film critics and audiences have responded to them as though to a lost, no-longer-to-be-hoped-for object of desire."<sup>4</sup> This is not quite so serious an example as it appears however of what Paul Willemsen, referring to the theoretical and ethical problems inherent in

applying European and North American film theory to the study of non-Western cinemas, has described as “a cultural cross-border raid, or worse, an attempt to annex another culture in a subordinate position by requiring it to conform to the raider’s cultural practices”.<sup>5</sup> It is rather just one particular view of the New Iranian Cinema. It is a view nevertheless, that by the very frequency and authority with which it is proffered, obscures and to a considerable degree misrepresents the bigger picture, the wider context within which the New Iranian Cinema exists and operates.

For the extent to which it is accurate to define the New Iranian Cinema in opposition to Hollywood cinema is certainly open to question. Eric Egan and Ali Mohammadi for instance, have argued that opposing the supranational hegemony of Hollywood cinema has little meaning for Iranian filmmakers, who are often far more concerned with their own responsibility as filmmakers to examine and depict the complexities of Iranian society, and who are so frequently caught up in their own complex and antagonistic relationship of negotiation and compromise with Iran’s film censors:

[T]he importance of the national is emphasized with Iranian cinema engaged in an attempt to reflect and question the multi-faceted nature of Iran, its people and their problems, while simultaneously engaged in a dialectical debate with the multi-faceted complexity of Iranian cinema itself. In this respect Iranian cinema is a national cinema not as a bulwark against Hollywood. Its adversary is indigenous cinema and those who seek to control the medium, which sees it firmly located in the socio-political formation of the modern state, with its internal structure as a determining factor in cultural production. Whereas the third cinema had originally identified Hollywood as the enemy, for Iranian cinema, it is merely a non-entity.<sup>6</sup>

These two contrasting visions of the New Iranian Cinema, as a ‘minor’ national art cinema resisting the global dominance of Hollywood on the one hand, and a more inward-looking, socially conscious cinema on the other hand, are opposing ends of the same ideological spectrum. Somewhere in-between these two extremes lies not necessarily a more ‘truthful’ or definitive vision of the New Iranian Cinema, but an altogether more nuanced understanding of what position the New Iranian Cinema occupies in today’s world, straddling as it does national and international boundaries, foreign and domestic film markets, and both sides of the debate concerning the globalisation of Hollywood cinema. It is not mere indeterminacy, or reflective of a lack of conviction, to argue for a more conciliatory and less polarised view of the New Iranian

Cinema. Rather it is to advocate a subtler and more malleable appreciation of what this cinema might mean to different people, in different places, and at different times.

Indeed, the socially conscious view of the New Iranian Cinema outlined by Egan and Mohammadi above is neither entirely incompatible nor inherently irreconcilable with an understanding of this cinema as a 'minor' cinema. As Willemsen has asserted, albeit with somewhat prescriptive overtones, any cinema which "seeks to engage with the questions of national specificity from a critical, non- or counter-hegemonic position is by definition a minority and poor cinema, dependant on the existence of a larger multinational or nationalised industrial sector".<sup>7</sup> According to Willemsen's definition therefore, a 'minor' cinema is characterised as much by its cultural particularity as it is by its economic, aesthetic and industrial 'inferiority' to, and difference from, dominant cinema, whether the latter be international (Hollywood) or domestic (popular indigenous cinema) in its outlook. Both qualities are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

While Egan and Mohammadi may thus overstate the supposed insignificance of the dominance of Hollywood cinema to Iranian filmmakers, their argument definitely highlights the dangers of defining Iranian cinema purely in terms of its *difference* from Hollywood cinema. For although such a comparative approach is undoubtedly useful, insofar as it provides an effective means of distinguishing and understanding the (dis)similarities between one 'foreign' cinema and another, it also risks reducing the complex social, political and economic dynamics that have contributed to the development of the New Iranian Cinema to a critically reductive binary opposition.

After briefly outlining therefore the historical context out of which the New Iranian Cinema began to emerge – or re-emerge rather – within post-revolutionary Iran, this chapter examines how this cinema has been received as a quintessential art cinema in Europe and North America. It then goes to consider to what extent this reception is justified by the formal and aesthetic qualities of the films themselves, as well as how this reception is at odds with the Iranian government's own attempt to define post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as an inherently 'Islamic' cinema, and the considerable difficulties involved in such an attempt. Finally, this chapter analyses how post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers, assailed from both sides, at home and

overseas, have striven to *define themselves* through their films, resisting both individually and collectively the attempt to reduce the New Iranian Cinema to just another in a long line of 'New Wave' cinemas on the one hand, and the attempt to dictate ideologically to this cinema on the other hand. The purpose of this analysis is to begin to problematise or open up the concept of the New Iranian Cinema to new and sometimes contradictory views. This commitment is then carried a step further in the second chapter, which considers what happens to the concept of the New Iranian Cinema as a national cinema, and the concept of national cinema itself more generally, when it is viewed in relation to exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking.

### **Iranian cinema after 1979**

The parallels between the New Iranian Cinema and European art cinema begin with the historical contexts out of which both emerged. The Second World War had a devastating impact upon the film industries of many countries across continental Europe. It was out of this devastation nonetheless, that many of the world's most important and influential cinematic movements arose. Similarly, the 1978-9 Iranian Revolution witnessed the upheaval of what had previously been a relatively healthy film industry within Iran. The infamous burning of the Rex Theatre in Abadan in August 1978, allegedly carried out by religious extremists who objected to the theatre screening the Behrouz Vossoughi film *Gavazn-ha/The Deer* (Masud Kimia'i, 1976, Iran), and which killed hundreds of audience members inside the cinema, was one exceptionally bloody example of many similar acts of destruction perpetrated during the revolutionary period. Iran therefore lacked a far-reaching cinematic infrastructure designed to support the growth and expansion of a national film industry following the revolution. Indeed this is still a considerable problem currently facing Iran's film industry. Various estimates put the number of cinemas operating in Iran at somewhere between 250 to 300, as compared to over 400 prior to the revolution, and the great majority of these located in the capital city of Tehran. Hamid Naficy has outlined authoritatively the many other practical problems hindering the regeneration and growth of a national Iranian cinema in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. These included:

the financial damage the industry suffered during the Revolution, a lack of government interest in cinema during the transitional period (for example, the first five-year budget plan in 1983 ignored cinema altogether), the absence of centralized authority and thus antagonistic competition over cinema between various factions (for example, MCIG [the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance], the Foundation of the Disinherited, and the Revolutionary Committees [which saw film production split unevenly amongst the public, the semi-public and the private sectors]), a lack of an appropriate cinematic model (there was no 'Islamic' film genre), heavy competition from imports [mainly from the USSR, but also from the US, Italy, and the UK], a drastic deterioration in the public image of the industry as a whole, the haphazard application of censorship, and the flight of many film professionals into exile.<sup>8</sup>

The increasing popularity of home video or VCD, as well as satellite television (despite the issuing of a fatwa in 1994 outlawing the latter) has also been detrimental to the development of the Iranian film industry. Despite the specificity of these problems to the post-revolutionary Iranian context however, there was nothing especially 'Iranian' about the ensuing measures taken by the government, under extreme pressure as they were from cinema owners and filmmakers alike, to address this crisis and deal with the impoverished state of the film industry. Like many post-war European governments that strove as best they could to insulate their local film industries from the cultural and economic imperialism of Hollywood cinema, the Iranian government introduced a range of taxes, subsidies and quotas designed to revive and foster a national film culture. The types of financial support that were introduced included a reduction in the municipal tax on Iranian films, and an increase in the same tax on foreign imports; an increase in tickets prices; the purchase of more up-to-date technical equipment, which was sorely needed; and the exemption of institutions such as the Farabi Cinema Foundation from paying any customs duty on its imports. These rudimentary yet vital measures were followed by more extensive policies, such as the introduction of a tax on the box-office receipts of every cinema in the country, to raise money for "health, social security and injury insurance" for entertainers and filmmakers. A few years later, banks were permitted to offer long-term loans to support local film production. A ratings system was also established, whereby "producers of highly rated films would earn increased revenues by exhibiting their films in higher-class theatres", entitling them to greater publicity and TV advertising. This system was eventually revised to introduce a ratings system, entitling a Grade A filmmaker for instance, to show their film at the best theatres, for longer periods of time, and providing them with significant funding for their next project, while also allowing them to bypass certain phases of the restrictive five-stage approval process operated by



the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance, which regulates and determines the production of all films in Iran.<sup>9</sup> Although the system encouraged and rewarded quality film production, it also crudely equated quality with bankability, making it particularly difficult for Grade C filmmakers to further their careers financially, and to shake off the stigma of their third-rate status. The subsequent privatisation of the Iranian economy, firstly under the government of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and then Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, resulted in the reduction of subsidies for the local film industry as a whole. The results for Iran's film industry however, were not quite so devastating as were initially envisaged. The predicted collapse of the industry has been offset to a large extent by the huge international success of Iranian cinema, and the significant amounts of foreign investment this recognition has entailed. As Naficy states, "Iranian cinema will not be able to flourish as a viable, non-governmental, commercial industry without foreign markets".<sup>10</sup>

Despite its draconian censorship laws, its continued intimidation and suppression of many filmmakers, and the often contradictory signals it sends out regarding cinema in Iran (as has been illustrated most recently by the fate of *Marmulak/The Lizard*<sup>11</sup> (Kamal Tabrizi, 2004, Iran)), it would be wrong to deny the importance of the role the Iranian government has played overall in resuscitating Iran's film industry after the revolution. In many ways the government has responded very shrewdly to the exigencies of the international film market, and of its own domestic film industry. It has provided a space for a national art cinema to flourish, albeit one that is funded primarily by foreign investment, and whatever its motives for doing so may be. The steady increase in the number of films made annually over the past twenty-five years, rising from a mere fifteen in 1982, to a high of eighty-seven in 2001 (followed by a slight fall to eighty-two in 2003),<sup>12</sup> illustrates the effectiveness of their policies, though foreign investment has also contributed significantly to this proliferation. As Naficy acknowledges:

[p]olitical consolidation, the centralization of imports and the passing of regulations concerning production and exhibition enhanced co-ordination and cohesiveness within the industry, brought cinema into line with Islamic values and criteria and improved overall film quality...[T]hroughout its existence, the Islamist regime has shown a surprising degree of flexibility and a great capacity for learning from its own mistakes...[T]he internationalization and commercialization of the film industry has made possible the emergence of an inchoate, independent, auteurist cinema that is independent from Iranian tastes, commercial concerns and governmental control.<sup>13</sup>

It is perhaps this very independence from "Iranian tastes, commercial concerns and governmental control" that has made the New Iranian Cinema so easily appropriable by foreign critics and audiences. It is not merely this cinema's apparent cultural anonymity however, that has contributed to its success overseas, and to its celebration as the art cinema of the moment. In what other ways therefore, does the New Iranian Cinema lend itself to its relocation within the tradition of European art cinema?

### **The New Iranian Cinema as art cinema**

On the one hand 'art cinema' may very well appear to be a redundant concept. One has to go back some twenty-five years after all, to Steve Neale and David Bordwell's influential writings on the subject, to find any material that makes a significant attempt to truly engage or get to grips with the term and explain what 'art cinema' actually means. On the other hand there is still certainly a great deal invested in the concept of art cinema (just as there is in the concept of the auteur) in the current international film market, even if it used inappropriately as a catch-all term for all non-English language, apparently non-commercial cinema. Local arthouse cinema screens continue to provide valuable alternatives to the standardised, predominantly Anglophone fare found at faceless multiplex cinemas, while an internationally acclaimed director's surname remains as strong a marketing tool as it ever has done for their latest cinematic offerings.

Traditional notions of the monolithic and homogenising nature of Hollywood's international dominance have been replaced gradually by more nuanced understandings of the heavily differentiated and complex nature of most film reception. It is perhaps unsurprising nonetheless, that the New Iranian Cinema finds itself valorised as an exemplary alternative art cinema, at a time when the increasing monopolisation of the US film industry by several major Hollywood film studios continues to blur considerably the lines separating US independent cinema from its commercial counterpart, and when most European film industries are perceived to be not only under serious threat from the encroachment of Hollywood cinema, but also imitating Hollywood stylistically in their own cinematic fare.

As Neale ironically observes however, as an institution art cinema relies just as heavily upon the notion of film as commodity as does so-called 'commercial' cinema, catering as it does to a particular "niche" within the international film market. Art cinema, maintains Neale, is, among many other things, a "mechanism of discrimination".

Art Cinema has rarely disturbed or altered fundamentally the commodity-based structures, relations and practices of what it likes nevertheless to label the 'commercial' film industry. It has merely modified them slightly. Certainly, radically avant-garde and insistently political practices have been persistently relegated either to its margins or else to a different social and cinematic space altogether.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting, taking Neale's comments into account, to consider to what extent Abbas Kiarostami's current standing on the international film scene as the foremost art cinema auteur is justified, especially in light of Laura Mulvey's description of Kiarostami's films as having more in common with "the avant-garde than art cinema".<sup>15</sup> In order to better understand therefore exactly how Kiarostami has come to be held in such regard, it is useful perhaps to turn to Bordwell's seminal essay on art cinema, and utilising the three main characteristics of art cinema that he identifies, examine the degree to which Kiarostami, and by extension the New Iranian Cinema itself, fits into the paradigm Bordwell proposes. Which is not to suggest that Bordwell's essay represents a definitive outline of art cinema, or that his conception of the term sufficiently encompasses and addresses all of the features of this cinema itself, textual and otherwise. Rather it is to acknowledge that Bordwell's essay remains one of the most significant and compelling attempts thus far to delineate the concept of art cinema, and analyse what kinds of films can be regarded as falling under its rubric. It therefore provides one of the soundest bases upon which to consider how and to what extent Kiarostami's cinema can accurately be described as an 'art cinema'.

### **(a) realism**

Art cinema, which "defines itself explicitly against the classical narrative mode, and especially against the cause-effect linkage of events", is 'realistic' claims Bordwell, not only because it shows us "real locations", but also because it uses "psychologically-complex" characters.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the two-dimensional, objective-driven protagonists of Hollywood

cinema, the characters found in art films “lack defined desires and goals...[sliding] passively from one situation to another.” This does not mean however, explains Bordwell, that the journeys these characters undertake, be they physical or otherwise, are always completely arbitrary. There is typically some underlying reason or motivation for their actions (or lack thereof rather), usually some “rough shape” to their movements.

The apparent applicability of the ‘realistic’ qualities of art cinema that Bordwell identifies above, to Kiarostami’s cinema, will be clear enough to anyone who has seen a Kiarostami film. Whether it is the film director figure of *And Life Goes On...*, Mr Badii from *Taste of Cherry*, or Behzad, the leader of the Tehran film crew from *The Wind Will Carry Us*, each character is distinguished by their seemingly endless wanderings through the landscapes they inhabit, and by their chance meetings with the people they encounter. In every instance however, each character’s meanderings are underpinned by a search for some elusive object of desire. In the film director’s case it is the two child actors who appeared in Kiarostami’s earlier film, *Where is the Friend’s House?*, and who are feared dead following the earthquake that devastated northern Iran in 1991. In Mr. Badii’s case the object of desire is an assistant willing to help him in his quest to commit suicide, and by extension, death itself. In Behzad’s case it is milk, the village girl Zeynab, and more apparently, the documentary footage of the mourning ritual he and his film crew have travelled to Siah Darreh for the purpose of recording. In certain respects, these characters’ desires are satisfied. In other respects they are not.

What these circuitous paths along which these characters venture do provide them with however, and which Bordwell identifies as another essential feature of art cinema’s ‘realism’, is sufficient space to “permit characters to express and explain their psychological states.”<sup>17</sup> In Kiarostami’s films this ‘space’ is typically the inside of a moving vehicle, within which the central characters engage in lengthy, often equally circuitous discussions with fellow travellers and momentary acquaintances they pick up along the way. In Kiarostami’s films however, very rarely do these discussions, these opportunities for the characters to “express and explain” themselves, ever truly lead to a fuller understanding of the character’s state of mind. Neither do they provide any form of “therapy” or “cure”, or any kind of emotional or psychological catharsis for

Kiarostami's characters. In *Taste of Cherry* for instance, Mr. Badii never reveals to any of his passengers why he seeks to kill himself, despite their persistent supplications. If the characters of art cinema that Bordwell describes therefore are "[s]low to act...[yet] tell all",<sup>18</sup> then the characters of Kiarostami's films are equally, if not more slow to act, yet by contrast refuse to tell all. As Elberto Elena remarks of *Taste of Cherry*, "Kiarostami completely rejects any psychological approach", although the landscapes Mr. Badii drives through serve to reflect acutely his shifting temperament throughout the film.<sup>19</sup>

Kiarostami furthermore, has displayed a consistently, and it would appear deliberately equivocal attitude towards the merits of cinematic 'realism'. In 1993, in an interview with Farah Nayeri, he states that: "[M]y only inspiration is reality", and insists: "I have done nothing but depict reality."<sup>20</sup> A mere four years later however, in an interview conducted in 1997 with Nassia Hamid, he takes an entirely antithetical stance, declaring that: "Reality cannot be encompassed. In my opinion the camera cannot register it."<sup>21</sup>

Laura Mulvey, in her appropriately entitled essay 'Kiarostami's uncertainty principle', has described Kiarostami's version of cinematic realism as defying any "expected aesthetic and analytic framework"<sup>22</sup> (at least from a wholly 'Western' perspective). She highlights one moment from *And Life Goes On...* when a member of the film crew, the script girl, briefly enters the frame. The script girl's sudden presence within the frame is a clear visual paradox, disrupting the film's spatial and temporal verisimilitude, revealing the film to be a *reconstruction* of reality, shot not in the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, but some unspecified amount of time following the disaster.<sup>23</sup> The dislocating effect is not entirely dissimilar to when a boom microphone accidentally protrudes into the frame in any number of poorly made Hollywood B-movies, momentarily shattering the illusion of reality constructed on screen. Whereas in the latter instance however the effect is usually unintentional (not to mention embarrassing), in Kiarostami's case it is wholly deliberate, a calculated distinction between what Mulvey calls "the reality of the cinema, always a construction, and the reality that happens essentially elsewhere."<sup>24</sup>

This distinction between reality and cinematic 'realism' is taken to extremes in Kiarostami's Koker and Poshteh trilogy, with each successive film in the cycle exposing the

artificiality of its predecessor. It has already been noted that the search for the two child actors from *Where is the Friend's House?* provides the narrative pretence for *And Life Goes On*....

Similarly, *Through the Olive Trees* opens with the actor Mohammed Ali Keshavaraz directly addressing the camera, revealing, in a scene extremely reminiscent of Brecht, that in this film he will portray the filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami, directing a scene from *And Life Goes On*....

In this respect Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinematic realism seems a thoroughly postmodern construct, which stands in stark contrast to the psychological realism of modernist art cinema (though Bordwell does distinguish, albeit unsatisfactorily, between 'art cinema' on the one hand, and 'modernist cinema' on the other hand, describing the latter as less ambiguous than art cinema, and more concerned with the "split of narrative structure from cinematic style").<sup>25</sup>

Although Kiarostami therefore invites clear parallels with French New Wave directors such as Godard and Truffaut, in his preference for location shooting and character-based, rather than event-driven narratives, in other respects Kiarostami's brand of cinematic realism moves beyond the anti-Hollywood binarism of so-called 'modernist' art cinema. Defying easy categorisation or clear-cut definition, many of Kiarostami's films represent a disorienting blend of reality and fiction, a peculiar 'factasy', pointing towards the existence of other realities beyond the frame of the camera.

### **(b) authorship**

Art cinema "foregrounds the author as a structure in the film's system" argues Bordwell, emphasising the director's role as a "formal component, the overriding intelligence organizing the film for our comprehension." The authorial expressiveness found in art cinema is ostensibly in marked contrast to the institutionalised anonymity and narrative accessibility of Hollywood cinema. "Within this frame of reference," continues Bordwell, "the author is the textual force "who" communicates (what the film is *saying?*) and "who" expresses (what is the artist's *personal vision?*)."<sup>26</sup>

Many analyses of Kiarostami's cinema thus far have themselves taken the form of classic auteur studies, in the mould that Bordwell proposes above, viewing Kiarostami himself as *the*

defining influence, the primary creative force that provides shape and uniformity to this eclectic yet remarkably consistent body of work. There are certainly enough stylistic and thematic similarities running throughout Kiarostami's oeuvre (with the somewhat anomalous exception of *Gozarash/The Report* (1978, Iran)) to support such a reading. Indeed the degree to which Kiarostami explicitly inscribes *himself* (or an actor portraying himself rather) into his films (specifically, *And Life Goes On...* and *Through the Olive Trees*) makes them doubly receptive to such an interpretation.

The following quote from Bordwell's essay, with a few minor additions of my own, hopefully illustrates the extent to which Kiarostami's films conform to and reinforce the authorial conventions expected of 'art cinema':

The competent viewer watches the film expecting not order in the narrative but stylistic signatures in narration: technical touches (Truffaut's freeze frames, Antonioni's pans, [Kiarostami's long takes, see figs 1-4]) and obsessive motifs (Bunuel's anticlericalism, Fellini's shows, Bergman's character names, [Kiarostami's vistas]). The film also offers itself as a chapter in an oeuvre. This strategy becomes especially apparent in the convention of the multi-film work (*The Apu Trilogy*, Bergman's two trilogies, Rohmer's "Moral Tales," and Truffaut's Doinel series [and Kiarostami's 'Koker and Poshteh' trilogy, or even Mohsen Makhmalbaf's 'Cinema' trilogy]. The initiated catch citations: references to previous films by the director [e.g. *And Life Goes On...* and *Through the Olive Trees*] or to works by others (e.g., the New Wave homages) [e.g. the appearance of Mohsen Makhmalbaf in *Nama-ye Nazdik/Close Up* (Kiarostami, 1989, Iran)].<sup>27</sup>

Kiarostami himself however, echoing his contradictory views on cinematic realism, has expressed equally contradictory opinions on his own role as a director. On the one hand, in the same Nassia Hamid interview mentioned above, he asserts that: "in cinema it's the message of the filmmaker that is important, not how close to reality the film is." On the other hand, in the very same interview, he significantly downplays his role as a "textual force" that attempts to either convey a message or express his own personal views to the audience through his films. On the contrary, it is the audience rather that bears the responsibility of making sense of his films. "The film-maker can only raise questions," states Kiarostami, "and it is the audience who should seek the answer, should have the opportunity for reflection to find questions in their own mind to complete the unfinished part of a work. So there are as many different versions of the same film as there are members of the audience." From this statement it would appear that Kiarostami places a far greater emphasis upon the ability of the audience themselves to construe meanings





**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

(stylistic signatures and obsessive motifs; fig. 1 from *Where is the Friend's House?* (1987); fig. 2 from *Through the Olive Trees* (1993); fig. 3 from *Taste of Cherry* (1997); and fig. 4 from *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999))



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**

from his films, than he does upon his own ability to express his particular artistic vision to the audience.

The statement recalls the comments made by Kiarostami some four years earlier in the aforementioned Farah Nayeri interview, when discussing the film *And Life Goes On...*, and its consideration of the significance of mourning. Once again, Kiarostami emphasises the importance of the role of the audience, and the part they play in interpreting his films. What is interesting to note however, is that although Kiarostami characteristically refutes the desirability, and indeed even the possibility, of attempting to communicate a clear message to the audience, his reasoning on this occasion does allow for the notion that the film, and hence its director, possesses its own opinions on the issues it is addressing, and its own answers to the questions it is raising, while at the same encouraging the audience to think for themselves.



As Francois Truffaut once said, "If you have a message for the spectator, go to the post office and send him a telegram." The only thing art can do is encourage the audience to think, in this case, to ponder the meaning of mourning. I hope the audience will wonder why, for example, a person who is mourning a beloved has to wait a whole year to marry? Perhaps the audience will come to *the conclusion the film wished them to reach* [my emphasis]; alternatively, they may conclude that it is good to mourn, weep and wear black. As directors, we have no right to pronounce judgements. Our mission is to raise issues.<sup>28</sup>

The above quote reveals a far more nuanced understanding of the film-viewing experience, one that recognises the audience as capable of thinking on two levels, *taking* meaning from the images unfolding before their eyes, at the very same time as they *give* meaning to these images. In this respect Kiarostami's cinema represents an interesting reconceptualisation of the role of the director, within the context of the predominantly stagnant and repetitive debate concerning the status of auteur theory in film studies. Both sides of this debate are often far too quick to either proclaim the death of the author on the one hand, or overstate the complete autonomy of the reader on the other, or completely overlook the issue altogether. Kiarostami's cinema by contrast aims to place the author/director and the reader/viewer on an equal footing with each other, envisioning the film-viewing experience to be an inherently two-way process, the film or text itself becoming the meeting ground of sorts between the two empirical subjects, the site of interpolation and imbrication. In this sense, without wishing to imply that Kiarostami's films are somehow fundamentally secular in nature, his cinema is a thoroughly *democratic* cinema.

In Kiarostami's cinema this resistance to definitiveness, or to 'certainty' rather as Laura Mulvey might put it, manifests itself in the polysemous nature of the films themselves, in particular their lack of a clear-cut resolution, what Bordwell might describe as their "ambiguity", the third defining trait of art cinema he identifies. The 'ambiguity' of Kiarostami's cinema shall be considered shortly. What is important to note at this point, in relation to how the concept of authorship inflects upon an understanding of Kiarostami's cinema as art cinema, is that in Kiarostami's case this polysemy or ambiguity becomes so frequent, and hence so expected on the part of his viewing audience (be they international or domestic), that it eventually becomes the authorial signature in itself, the directorial motif that comes to encapsulate and therefore essentialise Kiarostami's diverse and frequently indefinable filmmaking style.

Kiarostami's desire to diminish his own 'presence' within his films is displayed most starkly by his recent cinematic offerings *10* (2002, Iran/France/USA) and *Five* (2005, Iran/Japan/France), both of which, composed as they are of a series of extremely lengthy static shots, seemingly reduce the degree of directorial control to an absolute minimum, although *10* in particular is deceptively complex in its structural organisation. There is a sense however in which Kiarostami cannot escape the theoretical malleability of auteur-structuralism as it is typically practiced in film studies, seeming as it does to anticipate and preclude Kiarostami's attempts to curtail significantly his own creative autonomy and impart more interpretative freedom to the viewer. Indeed, despite Kiarostami's efforts to the contrary, auteur-based studies of his cinema continue to analyse his films utilising conceptual paradigms of authorship that are similar if not identical to the theories outlined by Bordwell above. Such readings of Kiarostami's films are not erroneous as such, or completely without merit. Many of Kiarostami's films are extremely similar after all, in their methodically and deliberately considered open-endedness. They do serve nevertheless, somewhat ironically, to shoehorn these films into a quintessentially European tradition of a fundamentally auteur-based understanding of 'art cinema', closing Kiarostami's films off to the kind of interpretative openness to which their director so strongly aspires. As the final chapter of this thesis on the films of Sohrab Shahid Saless will illustrate however, auteur theory certainly has its redeeming factors. By identifying certain thematic and stylistic characteristics running throughout a director's work, and viewing them as a consistent reflection of this filmmaker's personal artistic vision, the concept of authorship can help to enrich our understanding of a director's oeuvre, as well as guard against essentialising generalisations; in Saless's case, that his post-exilic films can be defined primarily or exclusively by an overriding, allegorical concern with the experience of exile. Indeed in addition to this, the final chapter of this thesis is intended to demonstrate the connections between the films of Saless and the films of Kiarostami, bringing this overview of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking in a sense full circle, highlighting the explicit links between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian filmmaking in exile and diaspora.

## Ambiguity

Kiarostami's tendency towards narrative irresolution, and hence ambiguity, is where he most clearly justifies comparisons with his modernist art cinema counterparts. "The art film is nonclassical in that it foregrounds deviations from the classical norm – there are certain gaps and problems," explains Bordwell. "But these very deviations are *placed*, resituated as realism (in life things happen this way) or authorial commentary (the ambiguity is symbolic)." This measured ambiguity ideally provokes questions in the minds of the audience, questions which the film does not try to answer as such. Rather the film offers a number of possibilities, a degree of uncertainty that is enjoyed and acknowledged as deliberate on the part of the informed viewer. However, "[i]f the organizational scheme of the art film creates the occasion for maximizing ambiguity," continues Bordwell, "how to conclude the film? The solution is the open-ended narrative. Given the film's episodic structure and the minimization of character goals, the story will often lack a clear-cut resolution."<sup>29</sup>

Such a strategy certainly seems to inform some of Kiarostami's most famous films. By the end of *And Life Goes On...* for instance, we are none the wiser as to whether or not the two child actors from *Where is the Friend's House?* survived the earthquake. Likewise, by the end of *Taste of Cherry* it is by no means clear if Mr. Badii has successfully committed suicide. Both films instead conclude before their central characters reach the end of their respective journeys, or in Mr. Badii's case, before he reaches the point of death, directing the viewer to what Laura Mulvey has described as "a level of perception and understanding beyond the desire to 'what know happens in the end'."<sup>30</sup>

This strategy extends to Kiarostami's earlier films also. As Geoff Andrew has noted, with specific reference to Kiarostami's first short film *Nan va Kucheh/Bread and Alley* (1970, Iran), as well as Kiarostami's later films for Kanun (Centre for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), although it is "faintly didactic...it is never remotely 'preachy', and it's difficult to say with any certainty just what lesson we are supposed to take away from it".<sup>31</sup>

There exist some notable exceptions to this rule within Kiarostami's overall oeuvre however. *Where is the Friend's House?* for example concludes with the safe return of the

Mohammad's homework book, although it is a visibly winding and indirect path by which this resolution is eventually reached. Similarly, though the severely minimalist quality of the concluding shot of *Through the Olive Trees* would suggest perhaps a more open interpretative framework, the film leaves the audience in little doubt as to the reciprocal nature of Tahereh's response to Hossein's constant confessions of love.

Hamid Dabashi takes a somewhat similar view of this shot in his 1995 *Critique* essay on the film, insofar as he argues that the shot is far from ambiguous. Where Dabashi's argument differs from my own however is in his contention that the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees*, and indeed Kiarostami's cinema overall, rather than being enigmatic or open to interpretation, is inherently resistant to interpretation altogether. Instead, by recognising the sheer materiality of the physical world through the unrelenting gaze of Kiarostami's camera, the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees* defies any tenuously symbolic or metaphorical readings, allowing the images to speak for themselves as it were.

[Kiarostami] dwells comfortably, deliberately, and with an ease that disarms all concocted readings, in that ironic space he crafts for his camera between fact and fantasy. One should not see this film with any set expectation of where the lines of demarcation are drawn between fact and fantasy, between the real and the concocted, between the received and the staged, between location and studio, living and acting. One has to let oneself loose and permit Kiarostami's camera work its magic and reveal a mode of being carved between any dual set of binary opposition... Under Kiarostami's gaze, reality is reread backward to a material irreducibility. At the moment of that material recognition, Kiarostami holds his camera constant and tries to negotiate a new definition of reality.<sup>32</sup>

As I have proposed above however, Kiarostami tries not so much to *define* a new reality as he does to *imply* the existence of other realities beyond the diegetic world of the film. Dabashi nevertheless takes his line of argument considerably further in his subsequent work, *Close Up – Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future*, in which he argues that all of Kiarostami's cinema prior to *The Wind Will Carry Us* in 1999 is manifestly "launched against interpretation".<sup>33</sup> According to Dabashi, Kiarostami's early cinema represents not only the triumphant culmination of a particularly Iranian tradition of artistic resistance to metaphysical tyranny and essentialisation, but also a victory against the totalising power of hermeneutics more generally.

Kiarostami's career has been constitutional to a visual modulation of *sign* as hermeneutically resistant to cultural *signification*. This is the singular achievement of Iranian cultural modernity that has come to full creative fruition in Kiarostami's films. If, before, Kiarostami, we had poetically shattered the word to dislodge the metaphysical claim of signification to it, with Kiarostami, we have visually mutated the very contention of

signification back to its glorious stage of *signation*, sensual *sign* before any metaphysical insistence on it to *significate*. The reason that Muslim ideologues in Iran have so violently attacked Kiarostami's film is precisely this disturbing stripping of the real from all its violent metaphysical claimants, which has visually allowed the *sign* simply to *signate*, palpitate with semiotic sensuality, without ever lapsing into habitual modes of *signification*.<sup>34</sup>

There are clear echoes here of Susan Sontag's call for an "erotics of art" in her essay entitled 'Against Interpretation'. As Donato Totaro has recently pointed out however, Sontag is "not against interpretation per se, but rules of interpretation", the systematic use of all-embracing rigid theoretical paradigms such as Freudianism, as a means of repetitively and redundantly *imposing* meaning upon works of art, rather than *revealing* meaning. "[Sontag] is against the practise of using an interpretative grid over and over to "decode" disparate works of art. When done indiscriminately the films in question begin to look alike, and the process reveals more about the critic than the film. These type of interpretations are reductive (reducing the film to a preconceived model) and prescriptive rather than descriptive (based on sensual surface properties of the art)."<sup>35</sup> Dabashi's call by contrast, for viewers of Kiarostami's cinema to immerse themselves in the sheer sensuousness of his images rather than to interpret them, seems ideologically opposed not only to the metaphysical violence and "hermeneutic paralysis" he so rightly critiques, but also to the act of interpretation on a more individualised, personalised level, a viewpoint that is clearly at odds with Kiarostami's insistence on the role of the audience as an equal participant in deciphering and making meaning of his films. Indeed Dabashi describes this insistence on the part of Kiarostami as disingenuous, a "refusal to engage in a critical reading of his own cinema", a "bogus democratic gesture, because who else is to decide other than the audience?"<sup>36</sup>

With *The Wind Will Carry Us*, argues Dabashi, Kiarostami has allowed his global success as a filmmaker to go to his head, pandering to Western audiences' Orientalist tastes for the 'exotic' and fascination with the 'Other', by creating what is essentially an ethnographic study of an Iranian-Kurdish village from a First World perspective. One scene in particular, in which the filmmaker Behzad, in search of some milk, follows a local peasant girl called Zeynab into the dark underground stable beneath her house, in order to try and seduce her, bears the full brunt of Dabashi's criticism. Composed almost entirely of one long, protracted, immobile single take,

much like the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees*, the scene shows Zeynab sitting in the shadows of the stable milking her cow (fig.5), as Behzad attempts futilely from off-screen to coax a reaction from her, even going so far as to recite a poem to her by Farough Farrokhzad, from which the film takes its title. Dabashi's polemic against this scene, which lambastes Kiarostami for ceasing to universalise Iranian dignity, though it is lengthy bears quotation in full, and provides a sense of the vitriolic language Dabashi employs to critique this scene:

From the moment that Kiarostami's camera leads us into the dark, dungeon-like stable where the girl is milking a cow until the moment the protagonist leaves with a bucketful of milk and a satisfied grin on his face, we pay through the nose for every pleasure we took in Kiarostami's not showing the private moments of souls exposed in his previous films, for every ounce of joy in not hearing Tahereh and Hossein converse at the end of *Through the Olive Trees*. ... We are punished for all these past delights and uplifting moments by having to watch this ghastly sequence of Kiarostami's camera seducing the mutely innocent peasant girl... Kiarostami's mise-en-scene is a brutally accurate picture of dehumanisation. From the vantage of Kiarostami's voyeuristic camera, all we see is the backside of the cow, with the girl squatting to milk her in the dim, dungeon-like depths of an ocular masturbation... Betraying every principle of visual decency that Kiarostami had honoured in all his previous films, the stable sequence in *The Wind Will Carry Us Away* is the nightmarish negation of every film he ever made, the return of all that his cinema had repressed, negated, and defied... What is particularly disturbing about the stable sequence is that Kiarostami's camera is so overwhelmingly powerful that it is not even aware of its power, and in this oblivion he exerts this power against the weakest, most vulnerable, and mutest subject. The stable sequence is one of the most violent rape scenes in all cinema. Kiarostami fails in this film because he ceases to universalise this particular Iranian village... he begins to particularize a universal indignity.<sup>37</sup>

There is a sense in which Dabashi's language is so inflammatory that it makes his argument extremely easy to take issue with. To avoid being accused of opportunism on this occasion therefore, I would rather draw the reader's attention to what Dabashi seems glaringly to overlook in his respective analyses of these two scenes from both *Through the Olive Trees* and



Figure 5

*The Wind Will Carry Us*; that being the relative simplicity of the former (within the context of Kiarostami's overall oeuvre) in contrast to the manifold complexity of the latter.

The difficulty with Dabashi's analysis of the stable scene in *The Wind Will Carry Us* for instance, is the absolute intolerance it seems to show for any other possible interpretations or alternative readings of this scene, its failure in other words to recognise the scene's strongly polysemous nature. For on the one hand, Behzad is very clearly trying to commit a kind of violation, by persistently asking Zeynab to reveal her face, while the camera similarly subjects Zeynab to its cold, impassive, unrelenting gaze. But on the other hand, as Jonathon Rosenbaum has observed in his book on Abbas Kiarostami, co-authored with Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, despite Behzad's repeated supplications, Zeynab *does not show her face*,<sup>38</sup> barely even acknowledging Behzad's presence throughout the scene (note also that for some reason Dabashi never refers to Zeynab by her actual name, despite it being clearly mentioned several times throughout the film). Seen in this light, Behzad's attempt to charm Zeynab, by loftily reciting a poem to her, appears to be as much a sign of desperation as it is one of patronising condescension. What is also particularly amusing about the scene is the way in which Zeynab herself actually undercuts the romantic mood that Behzad is trying to create, by interrupting him before he manages to finish the poem, bluntly informing Behzad that the bucket is full of milk just as he is about to utter the poem's final lines.

Zeynab moreover, is clearly much more in control of the space around her within this scene than Behzad. For instance, she has to physically guide Behzad in and out of the stable, to save him from tripping over or bumping into objects. Unlike Zeynab, Behzad is clearly out of his element. He emerges from the stable looking more like a fool for attempting to 'woo' Zeynab, than he does a contented lecher who has successfully seduced his prey. Zeynab moreover makes her mother return the money which Behzad offers as payment for the milk, refusing even to accept that. She also clearly uses the darkness around her to her advantage, to better conceal herself from Behzad's prying eyes, as well as from the gaze of Kiarostami's camera. Indeed if the unrelenting gaze of Kiarostami's camera in *The Wind Will Carry Us* ultimately fails to rescue these particular signs of Iranian life from the hermeneutic paralysis of interpretation – and to be

honest, this is not one of the most subtle scenes in Kiarostami's oeuvre, symbolically heavy-handed as it undoubtedly is – then it equally fails to force its own kind of voyeuristic paralysis upon Zeynab. Through her language, through her silence, through her movements and behaviour, Zeynab retains a great deal of agency, not only from Behzad, but also from Kiarostami's camera itself.

Rather than constituting a lurid ethnographic study therefore, *The Wind Will Carry Us* seems rather to be a meditation on the impossibility of capturing on film the essence of this particular Iranian village of Siah Darreh, and the ethical problems involved in attempting to do so. Dabashi for instance notes with great insight the way in which the unequal domestic power relations between Iran (represented by Behzad and the city of Tehran from which he comes) and its ethnic minorities such as the Kurds (the villagers of Siah Darreh) mirror the unequal global power relations between the 'West', represented by metropolitan centres such as London and Washington, and what Dabashi calls their "satellite peripheries", those countries which have been culturally colonised and exoticised by Western media and so-called 'nativist' filmmakers such as Kiarostami.<sup>39</sup>

What Dabashi's observation seemingly fails to take into account however is the extent to which the character of Behzad, aside from his physical resemblance to Kiarostami, represents a critical self-portrait on the part of the director, a highly unsympathetic portrayal of the kind of nativist filmmaker which critics such as Dabashi have accused Kiarostami himself of becoming. Indeed, Behzad actually fails in everything he sets out to do in the film. As pointed out above, he fails miserably in his efforts to seduce Zeynab. He also fails to record the mourning ritual following the elderly woman's funeral, the very purpose for which he and his film crew travel to Siah Darreh in the first place, as she stubbornly refuses to die during the course of their stay. It is also important to note that Behzad never even sees this old woman in the flesh – just as he never really 'sees' Zeynab – but rather receives constant updates about her faltering health from the young schoolboy Farzad. This play on being *seen* and *unseen*, which is illustrated vividly by the aforementioned stable sequence, constitutes a major theme running throughout the entire film, especially in respect of those characters who remain unseen or, perhaps more significantly,



gradually disappear from view as the film progresses. It is moreover, intimately linked with the film's unflattering depiction of Behzad as incapable of establishing any meaningful connections with any of the inhabitants of Siah Darreh, in particular Farzad, who acts as Behzad's guide about the village for the majority of the film. Farzad undoubtedly represents the best opportunity for Behzad to form a firm friendship. Behzad however hurts Farzad's feelings when he lashes out at the boy for revealing to his film crew that the old woman's condition is actually improving. The boy ostensibly rejects Behzad's subsequent attempt at an apology, refusing to shake his hand, and in a later scene, as Behzad drives about Siah Darreh desperately searching for help to rescue Zeynab's lover Youssef (yet another character we never see in the film), who has been buried alive, declines Behzad's offer of a lift in his car. In contrast to previous scenes in the film in which Behzad and Farzad converse with each other, and which employ a traditional shot/reverse shot pattern, in this scene the camera remains firmly fixed on Behzad sitting in the driver's seat of his car, as he looks out of the window addressing Farzad, who remains off-screen. The viewer continues to hear Farzad, but never sees him again after his falling out with Behzad. In a similar fashion, we never see Zeynab again after the stable sequence, after Behzad's failed attempt to seduce her. His film crew also desert him, mysteriously disappearing mid-way through the film (it is unlikely they returned to Tehran, for they leave behind the car in which they travelled to Siah Darreh). As Behzad becomes gradually more alienated from his surroundings and the people around him therefore, so too does our view of Siah Darreh become increasingly restricted, and its inhabitants ever more elusive as the film progresses.

This tension between being seen and unseen is suggested very early in the film, when Behzad tries to take some photos of the woman working in the local teahouse. As the woman and her husband argue, Behzad surreptitiously tries to take some photos of their quarrel, but is forbidden from doing so by the wife. For the majority of this scene, the camera lingers on Behzad as he watches the couple argue off-screen. This is significant because it demonstrates how the audience's point of view is not constantly filtered through Behzad's perspective. The audience rather spends as much time watching Behzad observing the world around him, and his reactions to what he sees, as they do actually 'seeing' Siah Darreh through Behzad's eyes.

This early scene parallels with a later scene in the film when Behzad passes through the teahouse once again, and in contrast to his previously inquisitive behaviour, on this occasion expresses no interest in the fact that a major quarrel has obviously occurred between the wife and her husband. The awkward silence between the two, as well as the stern looks on both of their faces, betrays as much information. Preoccupied with the making (or non-making rather) of his documentary however, Behzad becomes increasingly detached from and disinterested in the world around him, while the viewer is invited to observe those details Behzad fails to notice.

The film's penultimate scene provides a suitably ironic denouement to the film's meditation on the theme of 'looking'. As Behzad leaves Siah Darreh at dawn empty-handed, with no film crew or documentary to speak of, he manages to take some quick photos of a procession of women passing through the village. This march may or may not be the old woman's funeral procession. Although they are all wearing the same clothes, the women certainly do not appear to be in mourning as such. Indeed their calm and orderly behaviour contrasts starkly with the more dramatic description of the mourning ritual Behzad received earlier in the film from a local schoolteacher, who informed Behzad that the female mourners performed acts of self-mutilation, scarring their own faces. These photos nevertheless, taken fleetingly from the window of Behzad's car just before his departure, these stolen images as it were, are Behzad's only physical proof by the end of the film that he was ever in Siah Darreh. The village, and perhaps by extension Iran, and even reality itself, the film would seem to suggest, are things that can only be seen or captured in brief glimpses and snapshots, and can never be comprehended fully or in their entirety. One of the problems with this hypothesis, and with *The Wind Will Carry Us* more generally, is the way in which it suggests the myth of an underlying Iranian reality – or maybe Iranian-Kurdish reality is more appropriate – that is somehow impenetrable or unknowable, and therefore somehow more 'authentic' and/or 'real'. The way the narrative of the film itself is actually structured indeed contributes to this sense of mythic time unfolding, with one day seamlessly blending into another, until it is eventually revealed a little over an hour into the film that Behzad and his film crew have been in the village for over two weeks. Adding to this sense is the fact that *The Wind Will Carry Us* is the first Kiarostami film since *Close Up* that is not in any way self-

reflexive, insofar as there is no self-conscious effort to expose the artificiality or disrupt the verisimilitude of the diegetic world portrayed on screen. In constructing a completely insulated cinematic world for the first time since *Where is the Friend's House?* in 1987, Kiarostami defied the expectations of audiences in the 'West', who no doubt expected another tour de force of self-reflexive auteurism. It is arguably this complete absence of self-reflexivity that garnered the film such a hostile response from various quarters.

*The Wind Will Carry Us* nevertheless remains a rigorous interrogation of the filmmaking ethic, or lack thereof rather, behind the very kinds of works upon which Kiarostami's reputation as a renowned international auteur is based. In this respect, it is significant that *The Wind Will Carry Us*, made in 1999, falls in-between Kiarostami's other films *Taste of Cherry* and *10*, made in 1997 and 2002 respectively, because in many ways it appears to be a transitional film for Kiarostami, an exorcism of sorts, of all of thematic concerns, aesthetic features and directorial signatures that had come to epitomise his cinema, before embarking upon the bold stylistic experiment that was *10*.

To return to the closing shot of *Through the Olive Trees* therefore (fig. 6), Dabashi is correct to observe that there is nothing inherently ambiguous or "enigmatic" about this shot. But this is not because the shot itself is innately opposed to interpretation. Rather it is because the resolution that Kiarostami provides on this occasion is so simple and so *unambiguous* in its meaning, that it defies any *misinterpretation*. Indeed the conclusion of *Through the Olive Trees* is a quintessentially 'happy ending', in the strictest Hollywood sense of the term. Although there is no romantic kiss or lasting embrace, the boy (Hossein) clearly gets the girl (Tahereh). Which is not to say that the shot completely defies analysis, lacks depth, or is closed off to other possible avenues of interpretation. There still remain the obvious questions of: 'What exactly did Tahereh say?' and 'How did she say it?' It is certainly significant that the shift in Domenico Cimarosa's score, from pensive to joyful, is timed to coincide exactly, and moreover *ambiguously*, with the cessation of Hossein's pursuit of Tahereh. For as Tahereh finally turns to Hossein and acknowledges his presence, the music ceases as she utters her reply. Despite the momentary silence on the soundtrack however, the audience cannot hear Tahereh, because of her physical

distance from the camera. This momentary silence is a blank space, the missing piece in a cinematic jigsaw puzzle that is left empty to be filled in by the viewer. As Alberto Elena argues, although the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees* is decidedly unambiguous, Kiarostami continues to encourage the audience to play an active part in completing the film, in making meaning of what they see and hear, or in this instance rather, what they *do not* see and hear.

The audience is made to flounder straight away among the various planes and levels through which the film moves, invited to let themselves be carried away by this tide of confusion and occasional narrative obscurity, a closely woven web that Kiarostami unmistakably delights in weaving. But suppressing the audience's participation could not be further from the director's intentions. Instead, by these means he invites us to play an active part in the story (which despite everything does exist in the film); he demands we take up a stance with regard to what we are seeing... The ethos of Kiarostami's view of the world lies in this inherent and fundamental ambiguity.<sup>40</sup>

As Tahereh turns away from Hossein and continues on her way, the music recommences, and Hossein runs back along the path whence they came, visibly skipping and jumping for joy. The shift in musical mood thus also functions *meaningfully*, to reflect Hossein's inner emotions. Although Dabashi's emphasis on the physicality or sensual quality of this shot therefore is certainly helpful in outlining the elusively erotic quality of many of Kiarostami's images, his argument is fundamentally compromised, somewhat paradoxically, by the prescriptive interpretative paradigm of *anti-interpretation* via which he understands Kiarostami's cinema overall, and to which he demands all of Kiarostami's film adhere. Or to put it more simply, Dabashi's argument that the shot in question is inherently opposed or resistant to interpretation, is inevitably *an interpretation in itself*, an opinion that has been reached by way of an analysis of



Figure 6

the formal properties and the aesthetic qualities of the shot. It is therefore a contradictory and unsustainable position. Kiarostami himself has spoken of his original intention to end the film on a far more inconclusive note, which would have seen Hossein and Tahereh gradually disappear from view, Hossein's love perhaps forever unrequited. What eventually changed his mind, explains Kiarostami, was his desire to depart briefly from reality, to break down the class barriers separating Hossein and Tahereh, and fantasise momentarily:

At first I thought of leaving the couple to walk slowly away into the distance until they could no longer be seen. I thought there would always be an insuperable class barrier between them and that there was therefore no reason why the girl would consent... [Later] I said to myself, though, that I could leave tradition to one side and dream a little in this sequence, wishing and suggesting that she finally gives him a positive answer. If only I could intervene in a problem of social class (...) Film-making gives me this opportunity: to forget about reality sometimes, to break away from it and dream from time to time. And in my opinion, the audience has the same feelings at that moment, because they share the same desire to change reality.<sup>41</sup>

In his respective analyses of the stable sequence from *The Wind Will Carry Us* and the closing shot of *Through the Olive Trees* therefore, Dabashi underestimates the complexity of the former, while overestimating the simplicity of the latter. Like most of Kiarostami's cinema, the final shot of *Through the Olive Trees* is ambiguous in certain respects, and unambiguous in others, walking a fine line between certainty and uncertainty, just as Kiarostami himself performs a subtle balancing act between addressing issues of particular importance to Iranian society, and appealing to the tastes of the international art cinema audiences upon whose continued interest and patronage his career as a filmmaker so vitally depends.

The ambiguity of Kiarostami's cinema nevertheless has its roots more in the traditions of pre-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, than it does in the conventions of European art cinema. Indeed the closing shot of *Through the Olive Trees* reveals not so much a penchant for ambiguity, considered or otherwise, as it does a preference for an indirect, understated mode of narration that is reminiscent of the films of Sohrab Shahid Saless. As noted above, the connections between the films of Saless and Kiarostami will be considered at greater length in the final chapter of this thesis. It is regrettable to observe at this point however that Dabashi, who has in the past rightly challenged those accusations levelled at Kiarostami, that the director is guilty of "self-hatred, of being incapable of anything but disgust and denigration for his actors, audience,

and ultimately himself and his national and cultural identity",<sup>42</sup> has eventually come to reiterate these very same indictments.

### **At the Crossroads**

Not all responses to Kiarostami's cinema have been quite so cynical or inflexible however. Godfrey Cheshire for instance takes a far broader and more even-handed view of the New Iranian Cinema overall, using its obvious similarities to European art cinema as a means of introducing the reader to the culturally specific aspects of contemporary filmmaking in Iran. His 1993 piece, entitled "Where Iranian Cinema Is", introduces both Abbas Kiarostami and Mohsen Makhmalbaf as latter-day versions of Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut respectively.<sup>43</sup>

In this vein, Devin Orgeron's 2001 *Cineaction* essay remains one of the most insightful and well-considered analyses of the intimate links between Kiarostami's cinema and the traditions of European art cinema. It thus provides a useful counterpoint to the blanket application of Bordwell's model of 'art cinema' to Kiarostami's cinema which, despite the arguments made above, this chapter might otherwise be construed as endorsing. In brief, Orgeron focuses primarily on each cinema's shared use of the road, an image literally running throughout all of Kiarostami's works, as a symbol "to comment critically upon international and particularly non-Western cinema's longstanding and conflicted relationships with the image-machines of America and Hollywood in particular."<sup>44</sup> This symbolism, argues Orgeron, explicitly ties Kiarostami to other prominent European art cinema directors such as Vittorio De Sica, Jean-Luc Godard and Wim Wenders, all of whom use the motif of the road in their films in a similarly metaphorical and critical manner. Orgeron provides one particularly illuminating and compelling comparison between Godard and Kiarostami's critical employment of US (and also in Kiarostami's case, European) iconography, demonstrating equally dubious attitudes towards American (and once again in Kiarostami's case, more generally, 'Western') cultural imperialism.

Godard's fascination with the automobile and the road is rooted in his fascination with (and skepticism of) all things "American." The automobile is an inarguably American item, and Godard enhances and highlights its Americanness by frequently using American cars in his films. The automobile, however, is also metaphorically important to Godard's cinema. It is the embodiment of transportability and signifies the global movement of American culture... Kiarostami's films are similarly self-reflexive, similarly skeptical of the curious mobility of Western culture. One of Kiarostami's earliest Godardian experiments is explicitly concerned with highways. *The Solution* (1978) is a highly formal, eleven-minute film following a man on an isolated mountain road as he rolls a newly repaired tire to his

stranded automobile. This short film addresses several key Kiarostamian themes – themes that his feature –length films of the 80s and 90s would revolve more explicitly around. Key among them is the idea of *exportable culture* – here, of the imported variety. The film's protagonist drives a French Citroën, wears a Vietnam-era American flak jacket, and his actions are set to Western classical music. Like his Italian and French narrative predecessors, the protagonist in this short film is surrounded by signifiers of cultural mobility at the moment of his own problematic stasis.<sup>45</sup>

Orgeron also draws the reader's attention to one particularly telling moment in *Taste of Cherry*, when Mr. Badii encounters a young man wearing a UCLA t-shirt, which Orgeron interprets as a wry commentary, a "not-so-subtle joke about the reach of American culture", as well as the "film-school culture that has deemed Kiarostami the auteur of the moment."<sup>46</sup>

At the same time however, Orgeron, acknowledging the importance of Godfrey Cheshire's efforts to place the New Iranian Cinema within its particular historical and cultural contexts, notes how Kiarostami's cinema is equally indebted to a "tradition of Persian philosophy and literature...[that has] used the form of the journey to comment upon the contemporary condition."<sup>47</sup> It is hopefully evident by this point how commonly Kiarostami's characters resolve to embark upon journeys, spiritual as well as physical, although they are often apparently ignorant of the potentially transformative aspects of their travels. As has been noted already however, very rarely do Kiarostami's characters ever reach the end of their journeys. Their return home, or their arrival to some new destination is frequently suspended, their attainment of another level of self-awareness and understanding eternally delayed or left in doubt.

The more comprehensive and nuanced view of Kiarostami's cinema, and of the New Iranian Cinema more generally, found in Orgeron's essay is infinitely more conducive not only to a better understanding of the particularly Iranian nature of its more esoteric aspects, but also to a deeper appreciation of its very real links to Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, and the New German Cinema. It also sheds light on the means by which Iranian filmmakers such as Kiarostami ultimately negotiate their own paths through the narrow and occasionally conflicting channels of the international film industry.

Other factors have also clearly contributed to the increased popularity of the New Iranian Cinema in Europe and North America. The largely progressive image of Iran that emerges from these films for instance, significantly undermines the demonisation of the country by Western

media following the revolution (and also following the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001). In addition to Edward Said's powerful critique of US media coverage of the Iranian revolution and the ensuing hostage crisis,<sup>48</sup> Naficy has also written eloquently on the types of images and stereotypes that were endlessly recycled and circulated throughout the public domain by the media:

Iran was converted to a sign system, consisting of a limited repertoire of discrete and disembodied signs often repeated *ad nauseum*: bearded and turbaned mullahs, thick from Khomeini, veiled women, raised fists, unruly and frantic mobs shouting 'Death to America', 'Death to Carter', and finally the image of the blindfolded American hostage which opened the ABC's *Nightline* programme throughout the so-called 'hostage crisis'.<sup>49</sup>

Not only for European and US audiences, but also for Iranian audiences living overseas, the New Iranian Cinema provided a much-needed contrast to this media onslaught. As Michael M. J. Fischer notes: "At the first North American film festival where it was shown, *Bashu* elicited tears and cheers from a staunchly anti-revolutionary Iranian audience, which suddenly found itself confronted with evidence that not all that was happening in Iran was bad."<sup>50</sup>

Admiration for the New Iranian Cinema therefore was not simply a matter of discovering an 'alternative' cinema to oppose the dominance of Hollywood. For many of its advocates at home and abroad it was also an effective method of resisting the vilification of the Iranian people by the Western media, while for many Iranians living overseas it was clearly a cathartic process of sorts, a means of rediscovering and experiencing their country vicariously through the medium of film.

The progressive and sympathetic image of Iran that came to be associated with the New Iranian Cinema however, was to a certain extent also complicit with the perpetuation of what Bill Nichols describes as the "humanist framework" promoted by international film festivals. Nichols comments insightfully on how the film festival experience "inflects and constructs the meanings we ascribe" to newly 'discovered cinemas', on how the "humanist framework" encouraged by festivals predisposes audiences to interpret a sometimes extremely diverse and contradictory body of films in a very one-dimensional and uniform way:

The usual opening gambit in the discovery of new cinemas is the claim that these works deserve international attention because of their discovery by a festival... Films from nations not previously regarded as prominent film-producing countries [such as Iran in 1989] receive praise for their ability to transcend local issues and provincial tastes while simultaneously providing a window onto a different culture. We are invited to receive such



films as evidence of artistic maturity – the work of directors ready to take their place within an international fraternity of auteurs – and of a distinctive national culture – work that remains distinct from Hollywood-based norms in both style and theme... To what extent does the humanist framework encouraged by film festivals and the popular press not only steer our readings in selected directions but also obscure alternative readings or discourage their active pursuit?<sup>51</sup>

On the one hand therefore, the perhaps unexpected 'humanism' of the New Iranian Cinema has supplied a necessary counterpoint to the overwhelmingly negative media portrayal of Iran over the past twenty-five years. On the other hand, this 'humanism' has also helped ironically to reinforce the legitimacy of the very institutions that, though often the only available outlets for such non-English language fare, arguably do just as much to misrepresent the sum total of a country's cinematic output, as they do to widen the knowledge of international film audiences.

Kiarostami is clearly foremost among the group of Iranian auteurs who, like other non-Western directors before them, such as Akira Kurosawa and Satyajit Ray, were 'discovered' by Western audiences via international film festivals. As if to bear out the continuing validity of Nichols's remarks, as the popularity of the New Iranian Cinema gained further momentum, so too were many more directors quickly 'discovered', and portrayed as being somehow representative of the entire spectrum of film production inside Iran. There is nothing particularly 'Iranian' however about this quintessentially Eurocentric or Anglo-centric process of constructing and defining a foreign national 'art cinema'. Just as a mere handful of directors, such as Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut, came to be synonymous with the French New Wave, and directors such as Werner Herzog, Wim Wenders and Rainer Werner Fassbinder synonymous with the New German Cinema, and ergo representative of all French and German cinema respectively, so too post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has come to be typified by the works of a few internationally successful and acclaimed auteurs, most notably Kiarostami, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Dariush Mehrjui, Majid Majidi, Jafar Panahi and Bahram Beyza'i. This exclusive canon of male directors has nevertheless been widened in recent years to incorporate important women directors such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani and Samira Makhmalbaf.

Those who criticise the New Iranian Cinema's dependence on foreign markets often also fail to realise that there is nothing particularly 'Iranian' about this phenomenon either. For instance, ask any self-respecting film buff who the current quintessential British directors are, and

they would most likely mention the names Peter Greenaway, Ken Loach, Mike Leigh, Terence Davies, and, if they were to be a bit more parochial, perhaps Lynne Ramsey or Peter Mullen in Scotland. None of these supposed ambassadors for 'British' film culture however, much like their Iranian counterparts, enjoy substantial commercial success at the domestic box office. Like Iranian filmmakers, they rely upon the existence of an international art cinema and film festival circuit to market and distribute their films. To single out the New Iranian Cinema for its reliance on foreign markets therefore is particularly selective. Furthermore, there is arguably not as large a disparity, between those Iranian films that achieve international success, and those that are successful domestically at the box office as there is in other countries. Two of the most internationally acclaimed Iranian films of recent years, *Man*, *Taraneh*, *Panzdah Sal Daram/I'm Taraneh*, 15 (Rassul Sadr-Ameli, 2001, Iran) and *Zedan-e Zanan/Women's Prison* (Manijeh Hekmat, 2001, Iran), reached numbers 5 and 6 respectively in the box office top ten in Tehran for 2002. Over the past several years, many other Iranian films, praised overseas, have also enjoyed success at home, such as *Zir-e Poost-e Shar/Under the Skin of City* (Rakhsan Bani-Etemad, 2001), *Dokhtari ba Kafsh-haye Katani/The Girl in the Sneakers* (Sadr-Ameli, 1999, Iran) and *Rang-e Khoda/The Colour of Paradise* (Majid Majidi, 1999, Iran). 2002's number one box office hit however, the big-screen version of the long-running and incredibly popular children's television show, *Kolah, Ghermezi and Sarvenaz* (Iraj Tahmasb, 2001, Iran), named after its puppet protagonists, will probably never receive much international attention, though that should perhaps be construed more as reflective of the exclusionary practices of the international film festival circuit that Nichols so expertly examines, than it should be taken as any indication of the film's quality.<sup>52</sup>

But if the 'humanism' of the New Iranian Cinema made it more susceptible to its appropriation and valorisation in Europe and North America as an archetypal 'art cinema', then to what extent is this at odds with the Iranian government's own attempts to 'Islamize' Iranian cinema following the revolution? What might a consideration of how accurately post-revolutionary Iranian cinema can be described as an 'Islamic' cinema contribute to our understanding of the

New Iranian Cinema overall, or to the wider view of Iranian filmmaking rather than this thesis proposes?

### **An 'Islamic' cinema?**

As Andrew Higson argues in his seminal 1989 essay 'The Concept of National Cinema', there are two primary methods of establishing "the imaginary coherence" or "specificity" of a national cinema. The first method is an outward-looking process, whereby the national cinema in question defines itself in opposition or contrast to other national cinemas, asserting its difference and "otherness". The second method is an inward-looking process, whereby the national cinema in question defines itself "in relation to other already existing economies and cultures" within that nation-state.<sup>53</sup> Iran's religious and governmental authorities appear quite clearly to have sought to define the national character of Iranian cinema in such a way that borrows very strongly from both of the methods identified by Higson.

On the one hand, through the guidelines published in mid-1982, which regulated the exhibition of films and videos within Iran, the government clearly sought to distinguish Iranian cinema from the morally corruptive and degenerative cinemas of Western nations (cinema itself was after all, a Western-imported technology). Directly targeting films that – among other things – challenged the concept of monotheism, encouraged blasphemy, racism and immorality, and compromised the political, economic or cultural security and stability of the country and its government, these guidelines reflected the desire to imbue Iran's indigenous film production with specifically 'Islamic' values.<sup>54</sup> Despite the obvious similarities therefore, between the measures introduced by the Iranian government following the revolution, to protect the country's domestic film industry from foreign competition, and the measures introduced by many post-WWII European governments for the very same purpose, what distinguishes these measures in the Iranian case is their additional basis in a fear of ideological contamination.

On the other hand, the Iranian government also sought to purge the medium of the harmful influences with which it had come to be associated within Iran during the pre-revolutionary era. Indeed, if the loss of so many of its most gifted filmmakers following the revolution represented for Iran an overwhelming physical break with its rich pre-revolutionary

cinematic traditions, then the attempt to purify or 'Islamize' Iranian cinema symbolised a clear ideological break.

In 1996 the Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance issued a booklet further clarifying what themes were "acceptable subject matter" for Iranian filmmakers (such as the Iran-Iraq war, the 1979 Revolution, the role of women in Iranian society).<sup>55</sup> The problem with such vague regulative guidelines however, is that they are extremely open to interpretation. Furthermore, as Higson himself has elaborated more recently, despite the apparent applicability of his argument to post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and indeed to most 'national' cinemas in general, the inadequacy of such a model, in addition to its underlying Eurocentrism and reductive binarism, is that it risks taking for granted the supposed homogeneity of the nation-state:

[T]here is undeniably a danger that my essay transformed a historically specific Eurocentric, even Anglocentric version of what a national cinema might be into an ideal category, a theory of national cinema in the abstract that is assumed to be applicable in all contexts... The problem with this formulation is that it tends to assume that national identity and tradition are already fully formed and fixed in place. It also tends to take borders for granted and to assume that those borders are effective in containing political and economic developments, cultural practice and identity. In fact of course, borders are always leaky and there is a considerable degree of movement across them (even in the most authoritarian states)... Seen in this light, it is difficult to see the indigenous as either pure or stable. On the contrary, the degree of cultural cross-breeding and interpenetration, not only across borders but also within them, suggests that modern cultural formations are invariably hybrid and impure. They constantly mix together different 'indigeneities' and are thus always re-fashioning themselves, as opposed to exhibiting an already fully formed identity.<sup>56</sup>

As if to bear out the validity of Higson's more recent observations, many post-revolutionary Iranian films have explored the heterogeneity of post-revolutionary Iranian society. From films such as *Bashu*, *Gharibeh-ye Kuchak/Bashu*, *the Little Stranger* (Bahram Beyza'i, 1988, Iran), which focuses on the relationship between a young boy from war-torn southern Iran and a peasant woman from northern Gilan (neither can understand the other because they do not speak the same dialect, and in one scene the woman wonders at her inability to wash clean the boy's naturally darker skin); to films such as *Zamani baraye Masti Ashba/A Time for Drunken Horses* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2000, Iran), *Baran* (Majidi, 2001, Iran), *Lakposhtha ham Parvaz Mikonand/Turtles Can Fly* (Ghobadi, 2004, Iran/France/Iraq) and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, which examines the lives of Iran's minority Kurds; to the numerous films that hint at or confront directly the political, social and economic marginalisation of Iran's minority Afghan population (among

them *Badkonak-e Sefid/The White Balloon* (Jafar Panahi, 1995, Iran), *Taste of Cherry* and *Djomeh* (Hassan Yekta, 2000, Iran/France)); these films portray the hybridity of contemporary Iran, and point to the impracticality of viewing Iranian society as in any way monolithic or 'pure'.

Any attempt to uniformly Islamize the cinema of such a culturally and ethnically diverse country was perhaps doomed to failure. The hybridity of post-revolutionary Iranian society was not the only problem hindering the institutionalisation of an Islamic cinema however. Other problems included the fickle and unsystematic enforcement of the guidelines identified above. Whereas David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson for example, have demonstrated quite convincingly how the classical Hollywood mode of production led to the institutionalisation of a predominantly standardised aesthetic that emphasised narrative causality and psychological coherency, and which manifested itself through such practices as continuity editing,<sup>57</sup> the failure of the Iranian government to inculcate a distinctively *Iranian mode of production* so to speak, meant that at best the attempt to infuse Iranian cinema with Islamic values manifested itself at a narrative or thematic level, rather than a stylistic one.

As Naficy also rightly points out however, an 'Islamic' aesthetic can be seen to manifest itself to a certain extent through the ever-complex representations of women in Iranian cinema, though it may be due more to legal necessity rather than an artistic impulse on the part of the filmmakers themselves. The restrictions imposed upon the depiction of women in Iranian films following the revolution, and the predominantly formulaic but occasionally ingenious methods resorted to in order to portray female characters, while at the same time conform to censorship laws, have directly affected the stylistic make-up of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema:

[I]t is in the portrayal and treatment of women that the tensions surrounding the Islamization of cinema crystallize... Muslim women must be shown to be chaste and to have an important role in society as well as in raising God-fearing and responsible children. In addition, women were not to be treated like commodities or used to arouse sexual desires... To use women, a new grammar of film evolved, which included the following features: women actors being given static parts or filmed in such a way as to avoid showing their bodies... In addition, eye contact, especially when expressing 'desire', and touching between men and women were discouraged. All this meant that until recently women were often filmed in long-shot, with few close-ups or facial expressions.<sup>58</sup>

There is not sufficient space here to perform an in-depth analysis of the sheer variety of stylistic techniques employed to depict women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, such as the

precise choice of shots, methods of framing and modes of performance. It perhaps suffices to observe however that the restrained and desexualised portrayals of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is a far cry from the decidedly more risqué depictions of women in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, although there are some exceptions on both sides. Films such as *Dash Akol* (Masoud Kimia'i, 1974, Iran) and *Shazdeh Etehhaj/Prince Etehhaj* (Bahman Farmanara, 1974, Iran), both contain female nudity, the latter even featuring a brief scene of nude female torture! Indeed one of the reasons why the representation of women has become such an enduring subject in discussions about the New Iranian cinema (to the neglect of other important issues I would contend), is because in many ways it is one of the few easily discernible cornerstones upon which a specifically Islamic cinematic aesthetic can be seen to base itself, and which identifies these films as uniquely 'Iranian'.

Foremost among the problems hindering the institutionalisation of an Islamic cinema nevertheless was the inability to define clearly what exactly constituted an Islamic filmic aesthetic. This is not to suggest or maintain that any viable national cinema needs to be tied to or to pioneer a distinctive film style, but rather to point to the difficulties of representing Islam aesthetically via the medium of cinema. As Oleg Grabar observes for instance in his book *The Formation of Islamic Art*, though not with specific reference to cinema, the precise meanings attached to the word 'Islamic', when used to describe anything outside the rubric of the religion of Islam itself, are decidedly vague.

[W]hat does the word "Islamic" mean when used as an adjective modifying the noun "art"? What is the range of works of art that are presumably endowed with unique features? Is it comparable in kind to other artistic entities? "Islamic" does not refer to the art of a particular region, for a vast proportion of the monuments have little if anything to do with the faith of Islam. Works of art demonstrably made by and for non-Muslims can appropriately be studied as works of Islamic art...[W]e are not very clear on what is really meant by "Islamic" except insofar as it pertains to many of the usual categories – ethnic, cultural, temporal, geographic, religious – by which artistic creations and material culture in general are classified, without corresponding precisely to any of them. There is thus something elusively peculiar and apparently unique about the adjective "Islamic" when it is applied to any aspect of culture other than the faith itself.<sup>59</sup>

Some commentators have gone so far as to argue that the Iranian government's attempt to 'Islamize' the country's cinema has ironically produced a cinema that is decidedly secularist in its overall outlook and in fact "bereft of Islam".<sup>60</sup> Such arguments have been made with particular reference to the depiction of children in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. On the one hand,

Azadeh Farahmand for example has argued that representations of children in recent Iranian cinema are "informed by sentimentality and an obsessive romance with children's supposed innocence, purity and beauty", in a way that clearly panders to the "humanist framework" promoted by the international film festivals described above by Bill Nichols. The child as a symbol of humanism indeed has a long history in international art cinema, from films such as *Les quatre cents coups/The 400 Blows* (François Truffaut, 1959, France) to Satyajit Ray's 'Apu' trilogy (1955-9). Such representations in Iranian cinema, asserts Farahmand, are symptomatic of films made following the international success of *Where is the Friend's House?*, and differs markedly from the less idealised, grittier portrayals of children in Iranian films of the 1970s and 80s, such as *Yek Ettfaq-e Sadeh/A Simple Event* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1973, Iran), *Saz-dahani/Harmonica* (Naderi, 1974, Iran), *The Runner, Ab, Khak va Bad/Water, Wind and Dust* (Naderi, 1988, Iran) and *Bashu, the Little Stranger*.<sup>61</sup> Some of the concerns Farahmand expresses regarding this shift – that it is motivated by a "desire to renegotiate an image of Iranian society and to counter militant revolutionary stereotypes of Iranians through representations of children" – definitely hold some weight. There certainly appears to be a disturbing trend in recent Iranian cinema, whereby certain films, such as *The Colour of Paradise, Sokut/The Silence* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/Tajikistan/France) and *A Time For Drunken Horses*, explicitly link childhood with a physical disability, for example blindness, leaving these films wide open to accusations of manipulating the audiences' emotions via their particularly vulnerable child protagonists. On the other hand, certain commentators have pointed to the way in which children in Iranian cinema typically embody a distinctly secularist ideology, that defies the official state-sanctioned version of Islam. Or as Mohammadi and Egan might put it, in stressing man's responsibility "for his own actions, life, and destiny, serves as a huge affront and challenge to the Islamic government's belief system, legitimacy and concept of freedom".<sup>62</sup> (Mohammadi and Egan go on to examine the controversy caused by *Taste of Cherry*, in its portrayal of Mr. Badii as a man intent on committing suicide, in a sense the ultimate physical expression of self-determination.) Naficy has outlined in greater detail the way in which children in Iranian 'art cinema' have come to serve as secular yet ethical substitutes for traditional religious figures in Islamic belief:

The optimism and ethicalism of the Art Cinema films had a messianic source, which made the contemporary bad times tolerable because of the hope that a messiah will one day make them better. But this messianism was not strictly speaking religious or Islamic, for its agent was not a religious figure, a Mahdi or (for the Shi'is) the twelfth imam who is in occlusion, but often a surprising secular figure: a child. The purported innocence of children allowed revelation to be channelled through them and the messianic structure permitted hope of redemption and salvation to come through their individual actions... The radicalism of these films lies in their secular hope for the future and in their secular but ethical construction of life's fundamentals.<sup>63</sup>

By contrast, Michael M. J. Fischer's in-depth study of the influence of Iran's oral, literary and visual traditions upon the country's contemporary cinematic practices takes a somewhat different route, examining the compatibility of the Islamic religion with modern media. Fischer utilises Jacques Derrida's concept of globalatinization, which he summarises as Derrida's theory that "teletechnological media and Christianity are currently allied and hegemonic in making all visible, incarnate", and hence knowable. This phenomenon clashes with "Islam and Judaism, which refuse this iconicity and this presencing, insisting on infinite commentary, because God is never directly self-revealing";<sup>64</sup> or with what Grabar might describe as the preference in Islamic tradition and art in general for "nonrepresentational" symbolism.<sup>65</sup> As Derrida argues however, explains Fischer, such teletechnologies, by way of their very own ubiquity, ultimately exhaust their own global reach and totalising power. Rather than regarding globalatinization therefore as a process whereby the Western media relentlessly imposes its own Christian-cum-capitalist outlook upon the rest of the world argues Fischer, it should be understood as an inherently two-way process, in which various competing ideologies inflect and interpolate each other at a local as well as global level:

One needs...not to speculate not too much from afar, nor to grant too much too quickly to the forces of abstraction, capital, and specularization, but rather to engage ethnographically with the directors, producers, distributors and audiences, with their understandings, references, and allusions. It is not at all clear that globalatinization is the end of commentary or that the forces of capital and concentration of media ownership merely suck all into a Christian-defined terrain or performativity, though it may well be that the Muslim world today is a site par excellence of telecommunicative dissemination and of displacements of locality and tradition...[Globalatinization] need be neither a homogenizing process nor a wild frenzy of unstable positions driven merely by efforts to stake claims in the market. It can also work to establish niches in diasporic and transnational circuits.<sup>66</sup>

Fischer then goes on to demonstrate, via an analysis of four recent Iranian films (*Niaz/Need* (Ali Reza Davoudnezhad, 1992, Iran), *Ru-sari Abi/The Blue Scarf* (Bani-Etemad, 1995), *Azhans-e Shishe'il/The Glass Agency* (Ebrahim Hatamikia, 1997, Iran) and *The Wind Will*



*Carry Us*), that far from being "bereft of Islam" contemporary Iranian cinema is in fact deeply informed by an Islamic philosophy – in some instances an explicitly *Shii* Islamic philosophy, one that directly explores the notion of sacrifice – even if Iranian cinema as a whole exhibits a realist aesthetic that draws on "earlier Italian neorealist and East European absurdist styles".<sup>67</sup> This (Shii) Islamic philosophy or ethicality however is not something that has been uniformly imposed upon post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers by the state, but is rather a personalised Islamic sensibility of sorts, an outlook on life which exists to varying degrees within certain individual filmmakers, and which manifests itself in different ways in their films. In a similar vein Grabar has observed, with specific reference to the transition from pagan to Christian art in the Mediterranean, that a transformation in meaning does not always equate to a parallel transformation in form, and vice versa. While there may be nothing particularly 'Islamic' therefore about a long shot or a jump cut for instance, that does not mean that the decision to employ a long shot or a jump cut was not itself informed by a specifically Islamic sensibility. It is in this sense that the apparent platitude of describing cinema as a 'universal' language gains some considerable weight.

[C]hange in meaning and change in form are two separate phenomena that depend on each other but do not necessarily coincide... [C]hange consists not only in modifications to the visually perceptible features of form and subject matter but also to an interplay between these features and a feature that is less easy to comprehend, the mind of the beholder. In other words it is likely, or at least possible, that the fact that a Muslim looked at or used a form gave a different sense to that form, and that this difference of visual understanding or of practical use is largely what affected the making of further forms.<sup>68</sup>

Although Grabar acknowledges it is of course impossible to comprehend fully the "mind of the beholder" (I personally gave up trying to be an honorary Iranian a long time ago!), Lloyd Ridgeon's recent essay on *Nan va Goldun/Bread and Vase* aka *A Moment of Innocence* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996, Iran/France) remains one of the most astute analyses of how much of a bearing the personal experiences and religious beliefs of a filmmaker (in this case Mohsen Makhmalbaf) can have upon the nature their works. Although Makhmalbaf is a director who has found great favour with critics in the 'West' due to the thoroughly postmodern quality of his films, which often reject a linear narrative structure and embrace an explicit self-reflexivity – perhaps none more strongly than *A Moment of Innocence* – Ridgeon argues that the film offers a "spiritual,

Islamic perspective on the apocalypse". The film itself is an account of Makhmalbaf's attempt to recreate on film the moment from his youth when he stabbed a policeman, an act for which he was imprisoned when he was a member of a pro-revolutionary group in 1970s Iran. As the film reaches its climax, and the actor portraying the younger version of Makhmalbaf moves to stab the actor portraying the policeman, the symbols of violence – a gun and a knife – are replaced by symbols of peace – some bread and a flower – in the film's closing freeze-frame image (fig. 7). Distinguishing traditional visions of the apocalypse in Shiite Islam as the imminent appearance of the Mahdi on the one hand from a more personal, internalised moment of self-realisation (which has its roots in Sufism) on the other, Ridgeon explains how this small act of pacifist defiance of violence emphasises the importance of individual responsibility and self-determination:

The old generation is redeemed: The expectation of the Mahdi is to be undertaken in a more poetic fashion; the hungry should be fed and trees should be planted in Africa [presumably a reference to Makhmalbaf's earlier film *'Arusi-ye Khubani/Wedding of the Blessed* (1989, Iran), in which the protagonist, a traumatised veteran of the Iran-Iraq war, watches images of starving African children on television]. The young generation becomes the Mahdi to restore justice and order in a peaceful way to the world... This is a modern form of Shi'ism, an individualist Shi'ism that accords more with many of the forms of modernism and individualism found in the West. The apocalypse is not postponed, but is anticipated and interiorised by the individual, leaving him with the responsibility to act.<sup>69</sup>

Makhmalbaf's willed redemption of his younger self therefore reflects his disillusionment with the violent means by which he formerly sought to bring about revolutionary change in Iran, and his hope for the future of the country's contemporary youth. The film's insistence on individual responsibility, often mistaken for individualist secularism in the 'West', as Ridgeon



Figure 7

demonstrates is in fact deeply rooted in the Sufi tradition of Shiite Islam. If the cinema to emerge from Iran following the revolution can thus accurately be described as in any way 'Islamic', it is due more to the efforts of the filmmakers themselves, rather than the attempt by their government to institutionalise their own official version of Islam. To what extent is it correct however to characterise the filmmakers of the New Iranian Cinema as *collectively* opposed to the attempt, at home *and* abroad, to dictate the nature of their cinema? Or in other words, what similarities exist between their films to justify such a viewpoint, aside from the varying degrees to which most exhibit a distinctly personalised Islamic philosophy?

### **A cinema of resistance**

Describing any cinema as a 'cinema of resistance' is fundamentally problematic, as it implies a degree of strategic cooperation between the filmmakers in question, which may not necessarily be an accurate reflection of how this cinema actually operates. For the New Iranian cinema however, it seems a particularly appropriate epithet, due to the remarkably similar ways in which post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers have resisted the attempt by Western critics and audiences to pigeonhole their cinema as a 'new wave' quasi-European art cinema on the one hand, as well as the attempt by their own government to control this cinema ideologically on the other hand. As Naficy observes, international acclaim for Iranian cinema has not translated into "political prestige for the Islamist regime, as the regime's opponents in exile had feared". On the contrary, foreign audiences and critics have generally been sophisticated enough "to understand the constricted political contexts in which the films were produced", praising "the initiative and skilfulness of the filmmakers...not government largesse or manipulative capacity, for the high quality of the films".<sup>70</sup>

This resistance to being perceived and treated as political pawns by their own government has manifested itself thematically and stylistically in the works of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers, via a preference for what Bordwell might call 'ambiguity', but what is perhaps more accurately described as polysemy. Denied the possibility of openly criticising their own regime through censorship, yet without recourse to the often equally provocative ambiguity of

European art cinema, post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers have opted instead for a mode of storytelling that is open to multiple levels of interpretation. Ironically nonetheless, it is this very polysemy, based as it is in a desire that is inherently political in itself, to avoid legitimising the Iranian regime, which has led to the accusation that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema lacks a political or social conscience. Some critics, such as Ali Reza Haghighi for instance, have charged post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers with the failure to reflect the complexity of the political situation inside their own country:

[S]ince 1983, when the administration of cinema in Iran became centralized and regulated, the Iranian film industry has been unable to reflect significant elements of realpolitik. Political themes depicted in films are either past events (such as the crimes of the previous regime) or marginal issues (such as anti-revolutionary groups) after they have been resolved and are no longer a concern of society. In other words, cinema has not reflected the contemporary Iranian political scene.<sup>71</sup>

As Dabashi's critique of *The Wind Will Carry Us* above also illustrates, this opinion of the New Iranian Cinema is relatively commonplace, especially amongst Iranian émigré academics working in the 'West'. In this respect, Simon Chaudhuri and Howard Finn's recent *Screen* article represents a major step forward in thinking productively about the way in which the open-ended nature of many Iranian films *encourages* rather than *discourages* a political interpretation. Utilizing Pier Paolo Pasolini's concept of poetic realism, Paul Schrader's notion of the arrested image, and Gilles Deleuze's theory of the time-image, they point to the significance of the number of freeze-frame shots which conclude so many Iranian films, such as *Close Up*, *A Moment of Innocence*, *Sib/The Apple* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/France), and *The White Balloon*. Their analysis of the concluding shot of the final film, one of the most internationally popular Iranian films of recent years, illustrates the multitude of possible readings such 'open' images invite, despite their initial incomprehensibility (which film critics in the 'West' are often too quick to describe, somewhat lazily, as 'surreal', as if the word 'surreal' is somehow capable of encompassing all the potential meanings such complex images suggest).<sup>72</sup>

The film ends with the clock ticking down to New Year, an ominous offscreen explosion, and a freeze-frame: the Afghan refugee boy with his white balloon. The Afghan boy is in every sense 'marginal' to the narrative – this is, of course, the point. He has barely figured in the film, neither has the white balloon. And, one might add, neither have the Iranian political situation nor the question of Afghan refugees in Iran. Yet *The White Balloon* is the title of the film and this is the final image – one that, by its very unexpectedness and the fact that it is a long-held freeze-frame, announces itself as the crucial image of the film, a static image we are given the necessary time to 'read'...the implication is that the Afghan

refugee will not be going home to celebrate the New Year – he has no home. But the image is too ambiguous, too 'strong', to be reduced to one level of interpretation.<sup>73</sup>

For Chaudhuri and Finn therefore, the closing shot of *The White Balloon* does not so much provide a sense of resolution to the narrative, insofar as the white balloon of the title is finally revealed, as it does strongly hint at Iran's considerable Afghan refugee problem. Such images represent what Chaudhuri and Finn, paraphrasing Deleuze, call "the open-ended politicization of the image",<sup>74</sup> a defiance of the efforts of Iran's religious and political authorities to impose their own will upon the New Iranian Cinema, to purge the medium of political and ideological discord. "Iranian filmmakers have utilized the open image to circumvent a particularly strict form of censorship and point to the plurality of truth and experience in a political context where a repressive notion of one truth is imposed by the state."<sup>75</sup>

Chaudhuri and Finn's argument is also largely applicable to many of the static long takes which conclude so many Iranian films, such as the Kiarostami films discussed above. Although not freeze-frame images as such, their overall stillness combined with the lack of movement within the frame aims to provoke a comparable response from the viewer. The preponderance of this technique amongst such a relatively close-knit group of filmmakers (the Makhmalbaf family frequently assist on each other's films for instance, while Panahi himself is very much a disciple of Kiarostami) amounts to what could faithfully be described as a collective strategy of resistance to ideological and political determinism on the part of Iran's foremost contemporary filmmakers (rather than a resistance to interpretation altogether, as Dabashi would have it). Such a generalisation however should not and cannot be understood as representative of the entire spectrum of filmmaking within Iran. Many other filmmakers, who do not enjoy the same automatic access to foreign markets as directors such as Kiarostami and the Makmalbafs, are frequently engaged in their own individual, antagonistic battles of negotiation and compromise with Iran's film censors.

### **Reframing the New Iranian Cinema**

New yet old; global yet local; modernist yet postmodern; Islamic yet secular; such are the paradoxes of the New Iranian Cinema. A better understanding of these paradoxes is nevertheless

crucial to the more comprehensive panorama of Iranian filmmaking that this thesis attempts to outline. The danger in sketching such a broad and far-reaching overview however is that it risks overlooking some of the finer aspects or smaller details that characterise this cinema. This chapter has tried to compensate for such oversights by way of some close analysis of several of the key films of the New Iranian Cinema, as well as by comparing the different ways in which this cinema has been constructed and imagined as a 'national cinema' at home in Iran and overseas in Europe and North America, teasing out and examining the contradictions between these two contrasting visions of the New Iranian Cinema wherever they may arise.

Although there are clear parallels to be drawn with European art cinema therefore, in terms of the many thematic and aesthetic devices that characterise both cinemas, in most instances there exist subtle yet significant differences between how these devices are employed. Filmmakers working in Iran are influenced as much by their country's rich literary traditions as they are by the practices of their European counterparts. At the same time, the works of contemporary Iranian filmmakers bear the traces of the influences of their own cinematic forefathers, foremost among them being, as this thesis shall contend, Sohrab Shahid Saless.

Likewise, the New Iranian Cinema exhibits a clear humanist sensibility that is commonly perceived as secularism in the 'West'. This has nothing to do however with the ostensibly nonreligious outlook of many recent Iranian films, most of which, as pointed out above, are imbued with a deeply personalised sense of Islamic values. It has instead everything to do with the outdated and harmful prejudices of film critics and audiences in the 'West', which require that every version of Islam be inherently 'fundamentalist' in nature (which is not to stereotype Europe or North America, especially the latter, as irreligious societies). As Tariq Ali observes in his *Guardian* review of censorship in recent Iranian cinema, religion "is visible in many guises in some of these films, but never centre stage and never official."<sup>76</sup>

Finally, in-between these two competing visions of the New Iranian Cinema, one Eurocentric in nature and the other official, the filmmakers themselves have striven as best they can to put forward their own *personal* visions of contemporary Iran and its people. The methods by which they have sought to achieve this are by no means uniform or undifferentiated, but in

some instances share enough similarities to warrant the description of the New Iranian Cinema as a 'cinema of resistance', not in a militaristic sense, but in the sense that Iranian filmmakers have consistently defied attempts on both fronts to categorically define their works, as a model 'art cinema' on the one hand, and as a state-sanctioned 'Islamic' cinema on the other hand.

Such wariness on the part of Iran's current generation of filmmakers effectively undermines any accusations that they are ignorant of the fraught position they occupy in the 'West' as supposed ambassadors for contemporary Iranian culture, or are guilty of neglecting the political and social complexities of modern Iran. This much is illustrated by the aforementioned scene from *The Wind Will Carry Us*, when one of the schoolteachers in Siah Darreh makes clear to Behzad his reservations regarding Behzad's intention to document the graphic mourning ritual that will follow the elderly woman's impending death. "You look on it from the outside," he observes. "It may interest you. But personally..." he trails off, leaving his sentence unfinished. Like the schoolteacher, Iranian filmmakers are conscious of how they and their country are perceived. They are more than aware of who is watching them, whether the glance is cast from outside or from within their own country.

Such a wider and more nuanced understanding of the New Iranian Cinema helps to guard against the (mis)perception of this cinema as somehow homogenous or monolithic. The existence of a prolific and widespread Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora by contrast, begins to call into question the very geographical integrity of Iranian cinema itself, and the whole concept of 'national cinema' more generally. What is the nature of this other side to Iranian cinema, produced by émigré filmmakers working *outside* of their homeland? What are its links to the New Iranian Cinema? It is these questions which this thesis now goes on to consider, in effect taking a further step backwards in order to move closer towards a fuller understanding, or to gain an even broader perspective rather, of the multifaceted nature of contemporary Iranian filmmaking.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Philip Lopate, 'New York', *Film Comment* 33, no.6 (Nov/Dec 1997): 60.
- <sup>2</sup> Stephen Holden, 'Of Passion and Paradox in the Ruins', *New York Times*, February 17, 1995 (no pagination), <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE4DC163EF934A25751C0A963958260>.
- <sup>3</sup> Front cover of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 493, July/August 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Kiarostami's Uncertainty Principle', *Sight and Sound* 8, no. 6 (June 1998): 24.
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory* (London: British Film Institute, 1994), 211.
- <sup>6</sup> Eric Egan and Ali Mohammadi, "Cinema and Iran: Culture and Politics in the Islamic Republic", *Asian Cinema* 12, no.1 (Spring/Summer 2001): 26.
- <sup>7</sup> Willemen, 209-12.
- <sup>8</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran: A Post Khatami Update" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, 34 (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid. 39-52.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid. 53.
- <sup>11</sup> The film was initially released, but then withdrawn from cinema screens two weeks later after some clerics deemed it offensive.
- <sup>12</sup> *A Selection of Iranian Films 2003* (Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation, 2003), 99.
- <sup>13</sup> Naficy, 40-54.
- <sup>14</sup> Steve Neale, "Art Cinema as Institution", *Screen* 22, no. 1 (1989): 35-7.
- <sup>15</sup> Mulvey, 24.
- <sup>16</sup> David Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice", *Film Criticism* 4, no.1 (Fall 1979): 57.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid. 58.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami*, trans. Belinda Coombes (London: Saqi, 2005), 128.
- <sup>20</sup> Farah Nayeri, "Iranian Cinema: What Happened in Between", *Sight & Sound* 3, no.12 (1993): 28.
- <sup>21</sup> Nassia Hamid, "Near and Far", *Sight & Sound* 7, no.2 (1997): 24.
- <sup>22</sup> Mulvey, 24.
- <sup>23</sup> See Hamid, 24.
- <sup>24</sup> Mulvey, 27.
- <sup>25</sup> Bordwell, 61.
- <sup>26</sup> Ibid, 59-60.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. 59.
- <sup>28</sup> Nayeri, 28.
- <sup>29</sup> Bordwell, 60-1.
- <sup>30</sup> Mulvey, 27.
- <sup>31</sup> Geoff Andrew, *10* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 21-2.
- <sup>32</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "Re-Reading Reality: Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* and the Cultural Politics of Postrevolutionary Aesthetics", *Critique* 7 (1995): 78-86.
- <sup>33</sup> Dabashi, *Close Up – Iranian Cinema: Past, Present and Future* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), 256.
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid. 252.
- <sup>35</sup> Donato Totaro, "Susan Sontag: Against Interpretation?", *Offscreen* 9, Issue 1, January 31, 2005 (no pagination), [http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/phile/essays/against\\_interpretation/](http://www.offscreen.com/biblio/phile/essays/against_interpretation/).
- <sup>36</sup> Dabashi, *Close Up*, 256.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid. 253-5.
- <sup>38</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 34.
- <sup>39</sup> Dabashi, *Close Up*, 257.
- <sup>40</sup> Elena, 115.
- <sup>41</sup> Michel Ciment and Stephane Goudet, 'Entretien avec Abbas Kiarostami: Les six faces du cube', *Positif*, no.499 (September 2002): 18 (quoted in Elena, 112-3).
- <sup>42</sup> Dabashi, "Re-Reading Reality...", 71.
- <sup>43</sup> Godfrey Cheshire, "Where Iranian Cinema Is", *Film Comment* 29, no.2 (1993): 38.
- <sup>44</sup> David Orgeron, "The Import/Export Business: The Road to Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry*", *Cineaction*, no.54 (Jan 2001): 46.



- <sup>45</sup> Ibid. 49.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid. 51.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid. 50.
- <sup>48</sup> See Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (London: Vintage, 1997).
- <sup>49</sup> Naficy, "Mediawork's Representation of the Other: The Case of Iran" in *Questions of a Third Cinema*, ed. Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, 232 (London: British Film Institute, 1989).
- <sup>50</sup> Michael M. J. Fischer, *Mute Dreams, Blind Owls, and Dispersed Knowledges: Persian Poesis in the Transnational Circuitry* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2004), 235.
- <sup>51</sup> Bill Nichols, "Discovering Form, Inferring Meaning: New Cinemas and the Film Festival Circuit", *Film Quarterly* 47, no.3 (Spring 1994): 16-20.
- <sup>52</sup> Box office information obtained from *A Selection of Iranian Films 2003* (Farabi Cinema Foundation, 2003), p.98.
- <sup>53</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Concept of National Cinema", *Screen* 30, no.4 (1989): 38.
- <sup>54</sup> For a comprehensive list of these guidelines, see Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", 36-7.
- <sup>55</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, "Contemporary Iranian cinema and its major themes" in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 31-2 (London: National Film Theatre, 1999).
- <sup>56</sup> Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema" in *Cinema & Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort and Scott Mackenzie, 63-7 (London: Routledge, 2000).
- <sup>57</sup> Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).
- <sup>58</sup> Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", 46. See also Naficy's essay "Veiled Voice and Vision in Iranian Cinema: The Evolution of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's Films", reprinted in several volumes, but most recently in *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Murray Pomerance, 36-53 (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press: 2001). See also Shahla Lahiji's essay "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, 215-226 (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
- <sup>59</sup> Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 1-3.
- <sup>60</sup> Egan and Mohammadi, 19.
- <sup>61</sup> See Azadeh Farahmand, "Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, 86-108 (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
- <sup>62</sup> Egan and Mohammadi, 20.
- <sup>63</sup> Naficy, "Iranian Cinema" in *Companion Encyclopaedia of Middle Eastern and North African Film*, ed. Oliver Leaman, 179 (London: Routledge, 2001).
- <sup>64</sup> Fischer, 223.
- <sup>65</sup> Grabar, 18.
- <sup>66</sup> Fischer, 225-6.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid. 250-7.
- <sup>68</sup> Grabar, 5.
- <sup>69</sup> Lloyd Ridgeon, "The Islamic Apocalypse: Mohsen Makhmalbaf's A Moment of Innocence" in *Representing Religion in World Cinema: Filmmaking, Mythmaking, Culture Making*, ed. Brent S. Plate, 155-7 (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003).
- <sup>70</sup> Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran", 53.
- <sup>71</sup> Ali Reza Haghighi, "Politics and Cinema in Post-revolutionary Iran: An Uneasy Relationship" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, 109 (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).
- <sup>72</sup> The overuse of this already belaboured adjective was particularly prevalent in reviews of the recent Afghan film *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003, Afghanistan/Netherlands/Japan/Ireland/Iran), produced by an uncredited Mohsen Makhmalbaf.
- <sup>73</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn, "The open image: poetic realism and the New Iranian Cinema", *Screen* 44, no.1 (Spring 2003): p.56.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid. 43.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid. 57.
- <sup>76</sup> Tariq Ali, 'Fight the Power', *Guardian*, April 23, 2005 (no pagination)  
<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1468242,00.html>.

## **Chapter 2 – From Iran to Hollywood and someplace(s) in-between: Iranian Cinema in Exile and Diaspora**

The period leading up to and following the Iranian Revolution in 1979 witnessed the departure of some of the country's most accomplished and influential filmmakers. Over the past thirty years these filmmakers have produced a varied and diffuse Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, that as Naficy explains, has only recently begun to acquire a collective dimension, with the organisation of numerous film festivals across Europe and North America showcasing the works of these filmmakers.<sup>1</sup>

The aim of this chapter is to open up the New Iranian Cinema to even broader perspectives, by examining how the existence of an Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora is capable of refining traditional understandings of the New Iranian Cinema as a geographically insulated phenomenon. To consider in short, how the works of Iranian émigré filmmakers can also be understood as belonging to a post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, further complicating the notion of a homogenous Iranian national cinema, defined solely in opposition to Hollywood filmmaking on the one hand, and entirely in relation to the complexities of Iranian society on the other hand. Such a deterritorialised understanding of contemporary Iranian filmmaking also has implications for the concept of national cinema itself more generally, as it is used as an organisational, analytical category in film studies. On the one hand, the logic informing such an argument may seem straightforward and/or overly simplistic: there are many Iranian filmmakers working outside of their homeland, ergo Iranian cinema, and by extension all other national cinemas, can no longer be conceived of as running along purely geographical lines. On the other hand there are certain assumptions underlying such an argument, assumptions that are definitely valid, but to varying degrees. Firstly, it presumes that the Iranian nationality or heritage of the exilic and diasporic filmmakers in question is enough in itself to determine the national identity or belonging of their works. Most films however are 'authored' by many people, from a variety of cultural backgrounds, all working at different levels in the filmmaking process. Which is not to

argue that a film cannot be regarded as an example of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking simply because an Iranian émigré may not occupy the primary creative role of director. Rather it is to argue, that even though authorship has certainly been the most common selective criterion for the films analysed in this chapter, other factors need to be taken into consideration, as is illustrated by films such as *Walls of Sand* (1994, USA), directed by US independent filmmaker Erica Jordan, and *House of Sand and Fog* (2003, USA), directed by Ukrainian émigré filmmaker Vadim Perelman. Conversely for instance, a film such as *Nightsongs* (1984, USA), by virtue of its subject matter and predominantly Chinese-American cast, is as much an example of exilic and diasporic Chinese cinema as it is exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, despite the fact that it is directed by Iranian émigré filmmaker Marva Nabili. Furthermore, as this chapter shall demonstrate, rather than putting forward an essentialised or 'pure' notion of Iranian ethnicity, or proclaiming their affinity with the directors of the New Iranian Cinema, many of these filmmakers are explicitly concerned with exploring and problematising the notion of fixed identities. Which is not to say that filmmakers working in exile and diaspora necessarily always feel it incumbent upon themselves to tackle such issues, or make films that directly address or somehow reflect their own hybrid sense of identity, for such thinking would be equally presumptuous and deterministic in its logic. In particular it overlooks the degree to which Iranian émigré filmmakers may identify with or have assimilated into the society of the 'host country' in which they reside, a 'host country' that in the case of many second-generation and third-generation émigré filmmakers will be regarded as 'home'. Rather it is to contend, as the films considered in this chapter indicate, that the question of one's national, cultural and personal identity is understandably a pressing issue for many Iranian filmmakers living and working in exile and diaspora (it is no mere coincidence after all, that many of the films considered in this chapter are autobiographical in nature). It is perhaps useful therefore to understand these films as individually concerned with examining how the experience of residing outside of one's homeland (ancestral or otherwise) affects a stable and/or complete sense of self-identity, rather than positing collectively the

existence of an all-encompassing and monolithic, albeit multi-sited sense of Iranian identity. It is likewise perhaps more productive therefore, before accepting these films as belonging to or constitutive of an extra-national Iranian cinema purely on the basis of the ethnic origins of the people who made them, to analyse the various ways in which these films, somewhat paradoxically, challenge and destabilise a homogenous and unitary notion of Iranian identity.

The second set of assumptions presume that the concept of national cinema itself is inflexible, incapable of adapting to the theoretical developments being made in film studies, which is recognising increasingly the inherently *transnational* nature of most filmmaking. The concept of national cinema however, has never merely been about a sense of geographical belonging or rootedness. It has also typically been, to greater and lesser extents, about the degree of thematic and stylistic cohesiveness (or indeed, lack thereof) that the films of a particular country may or may not exhibit over a given period of time; the extent to which this cohesiveness is the result of state intervention, artistic self-determination and collaboration, etc; and in what ways these films are reflective, individually and collectively, of the particular historical, social and personal contexts in which they were made. As such the theoretical paradigm of national cinema would appear to provide a useful means of assessing the thematic, aesthetic, artistic and historical unity of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking. It would be somewhat misleading and disingenuous therefore, to suggest that the concept of national cinema is somehow rendered invalid or outmoded simply because of the belated yet significant realisation that 'national' cinemas are rarely entirely discrete entities, contained within impassable or insuperable geographical boundaries. Rather than doing away with the concept of national cinema, it would seem that a more malleable and subtle understanding of the term is required, one that is more capable of comprehending and accommodating the fundamentally imbricated nature of the constitution and development of most 'national' cinemas.

The precise implications for the concept of national cinema however, will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion to this thesis. What this chapter attempts rather is to examine how

the many films considered below, separated from each other by differences in location, language, and their contrasting visions of the experience of displacement, can be conceived of collectively as an exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, aside from, though certainly not independent of the fact that they are all made by Iranian émigrés. As will hopefully become apparent, this diverse body of work is capable of being conceived of as such due to its being visibly informed in all instances by clearly exilic and/or diasporic sensibility. Such a far-reaching comprehension of Iranian filmmaking in exile and diaspora promises to bring us closer towards a more nuanced appreciation of the heterogeneous and contradictory nature of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and by extension its most popular incarnation, the New Iranian Cinema.

Before discussing the films themselves therefore, this chapter provides a brief overview of the recent theoretical developments that have taken place in the field of exile and diaspora studies, developments that are characterised by a shift from a predominantly essentialist and undifferentiated conception of both 'conditions', for lack of a better term, to a more particularised and adaptable understanding of the vicissitudes of living in exile and diaspora. Additionally, this chapter provides an analysis of Hamid Naficy's monumental work on exilic and diasporic filmmaking in general, entitled *An Accented Cinema*. Because Naficy's work has had such a large bearing upon my own research, and has been so influential in studies of exilic and diasporic cinema overall, it is necessary to address his theories at some length here. What follows therefore is an analysis of how Naficy's proposed concept of "accented cinema" is conducive to a better understanding of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking, as well as how my own methodological approach resembles yet differs from his own.

Thereafter follows an analysis of the works of a variety of Iranian émigré filmmakers working in exile and diaspora across Europe and North America since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The group of films considered below are assembled into smaller units of analysis according to factors such as temporal contiguity, geographical location, and the similar attitudes they exhibit towards the experience of displacement. The overall structure of this chapter

nevertheless is largely chronological in nature, intended to reflect the gradual shift from an invariable and exclusionary view of the experience of displacement, discernible in films such as *The Mission* (Parviz Sayyad, 1983, USA/West Germany), to a more even-handed and inclusive outlook, as evidenced by the pan-diasporic quality of films such as *America So Beautiful* (Babak Shokrian, 2001, USA), a transformation somewhat analogous to the shift in exile and diaspora theory noted briefly above, and explored in greater detail below.

It should be noted however that in this chapter, as well as in chapters three and four, my analysis has been greatly limited quite simply to those films I was able to get my hands on. The films I consider were obtained from a variety of sources, including film archives, film museums, television stations, production companies and in some instances the filmmakers themselves, and from a variety of countries, from Iran to Sweden to Germany to Italy to the US and Canada. Needless to say, the difficulty I had in obtaining many of these films is itself reflective of the itinerant nature of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema. In the case of filmmakers such as Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless, it is also reflective of the current critical standing (or rather lack thereof) of their films, making the acquirement of all these films a logistical, financial and practical impossibility. It needs to be stressed therefore that the films considered in this chapter, and in this thesis overall, are by no means representative of the entire spectrum of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking. Indeed no study of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema would be complete for instance, without a consideration of the works of other important filmmakers such as Houshang Allahyari in Austria and Parviz Kimiavi in France. The consideration of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema undertaken in this chapter nonetheless, amounts to a significant and wide-ranging analysis of the current state of émigré Iranian filmmaking. More importantly, for the specific purposes of this thesis, this analysis promises to expand our understanding of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

### **Exile, Diaspora and “Accented Cinema”: An Overview**

In her book *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora*, a collection of narratives by Iranian-Americans living throughout the United States, Zohreh C. Sullivan explains how, on those occasions when she was confronted by silence from those interviewees whose stories comprise her book, she asked them the following question:

If you were to make a film of your life, what moment or image would you choose to start with? How would you shape your story?<sup>2</sup>

I remember being similarly struck upon reading *Letters From Prison*, when in a letter dated February 12 1927 Antonio Gramsci describes his transfer from the island of Ustica to the San Vittore prison in Milan as one “very long cinematic event”.<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing this letter, Gramsci himself was going into a kind of exile, an *internal* exile, imprisoned within his own country.

Although Gramsci may very well have been referring merely to the picturesque vistas of the Italian landscape, his statement, as does Sullivan's, begs the question: “What makes cinema such an appropriate and effective medium for portraying the experience of displacement?” Is it the ability to actually *visualise* this experience, and moreover to fuse this visualisation with sounds, either the strange noises and unfamiliar voices an exiled or diasporic subject may encounter upon arriving in a foreign country or environment, or with the resonant music of their homeland? Or is it the ability to overlay these sounds and images with a voiceover narration, thereby personalizing the story of displacement unfolding before the viewer's eyes in a way that is simply not possible in other mediums such as the novel, or poetry, or song?

In his recent essay on the mixed aesthetics of so-called Third World cinema, in addition to exilic and diasporic filmmaking, Robert Stam argues that it is the unique ability of cinema to combine image and sound, and to cut across a variety of different times and spaces, that accounts for its capacity to represent spatiotemporal dislocation and imbrication, as well as cultural hybridity. Utilising Mikhail Bakhtin's influential concept of the chronotope therefore, which

Hamid Naficy neatly summarises as "literally, "time-space"...a "unit of analysis" for studying texts in terms of their representation of spatial and temporal configurations and as an "optic" for analysing the forces in the culture that produce these configurations",<sup>4</sup> Stam offers an eloquent and compelling exposition of the inherent suitability of cinema to "express cultural and temporal hybridity":

As a technology of representation, the cinema mingles diverse times and spaces; it is produced in one constellation of times and spaces, it represents still another (diegetic) constellation of times and places, and it is received in still another time and space (theatre, home, classroom). Film's conjunction of sound and image means that each track not only represents two kinds of time, but also that they mutually infect one another in a form of synchresis. Atemporal static shots can be inscribed with temporality through sound. The panopoly of available cinematic techniques further multiplies these already multiple times and spaces. Superimposition redoubles the time and space, as do montage and multiple frames within the image. The capacity for palimpsestic overlays of images and sounds facilitated by the new computer and video technologies further amplify possibilities for fracture, rupture and polyphony. An electronic "quilting" can weave together sounds and images in ways that break with linear single-line narrative, opening up utopias (and dystopias) of infinite manipulability. The "normal" sequential flow can be disrupted and sidetracked to take account of simultaneity and parallelism. Rather than an Aristotelian sequence of exposition, identification, suspense, pathos and catharsis, the audio-visual text becomes a tapestry...[C]inema embodies the inherent relationality of time (chronos) and space (topos); it is space temporalized and time spatialized, the site where time takes place and place takes time.<sup>5</sup>

For Stam therefore, it is the "chronotopic multiplicity" of cinema that makes it such an ideal medium for reflecting the spatial, temporal and cultural instability of the increasing overlap between the First and Third World, and of exilic and diasporic hybrid identities.

Acknowledging the influence of Bakhtin on his own work on exilic and diasporic cinema, Naficy proposes the term "accented cinema" in his monumental work of the same name, as a means of theorising and categorising collectively the body of films made by what he describes as the many exilic, diasporic and postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers from all over the world, though his scope of enquiry is broadly limited to "postcolonial, Third World" filmmakers working in the 'West'. What unifies all of these "accented" filmmakers argues Naficy, despite their different cultural backgrounds and respective experiences of displacement, is their "liminal subjectivity and interstitial location in society and the film industry".<sup>6</sup> Their films require a new set of viewing skills on the part of the viewer, a degree of an awareness and cinematic literacy that is not demanded of the standardised film language of mainstream Hollywood cinema:



[A]lthough there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized peoples and their films share certain features, which in today's climate of lethal ethnic difference need to be considered, even emphasized....not only watching and listening but also reading, translating, and writing....[are] all part of the spectatorial activities and competencies that are needed for appreciating the works of these filmmakers, which I have termed "accented cinema".<sup>7</sup>

Defining "accented cinema" mainly in opposition to Hollywood cinema and dominant or capitalist modes of film production, exilic and diasporic films are distinguished by their "accented", small-scale mode of production, be it individual or collective. Stylistically, "accented cinema" is characterised by its "smallness, imperfection, amateurishness, and lack of cinematic gloss".<sup>8</sup> The similarities between "accented cinema" and Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino's concept of Third Cinema are clear.<sup>9</sup> Although less polemical than Third Cinema, "accented cinema" is "nonetheless a political cinema that stands opposed to authoritarianism and oppression. If Third Cinema films generally advocated class struggle and armed struggle, accented films favour discursive and semiotic struggles."<sup>10</sup> Like their Third Cinema counterparts, "accented" films directly challenge established conventions of filmmaking by mixing and confusing genres (such as fiction and documentary), by problematising straightforward viewer identification, by fragmenting traditional narrative structure and time, and by literally *looking* crude and unaccomplished (purposefully or otherwise), as if they were the work of non-professionals, which of course they frequently are. (Many of these features it is also worth noting are characteristic of the New Iranian Cinema itself). "Accented" films moreover share certain thematic concerns, manifested in their narratives of journeying, border crossing and identity crossing; and certain formal features, such as their epistolarity, their self-reflexivity, and most significantly their chronotopic visions of the homeland or life in exile and diaspora.

Like Stam, Naficy also employs the concept of the chronotope as a means of examining how "accented" films "link the inherited space-time of the homeland to the constructed space-time of the exile and diaspora".<sup>11</sup> Naficy illustrates how representations of the homeland and life in exile and diaspora frequently take the shape of what he describes as open-form and/or closed-form chronotopes. Open-form chronotopes, with their visual motifs of landscapes, mountains,

monuments, and various other national signifiers, foster a cathected and fetishised vision of the homeland. The mise en scène of closed-form chronotopes by contrast, construct a synaesthetic vision of life in exile and diaspora as claustrophobic, oppressive, and imprisoning. This visual style is also often combined with that Naficy calls "narratives of panic and pursuit".<sup>12</sup> The table below (which is by no means exhaustive) should provide a clearer picture of the dichotomy Naficy proposes:

<u>Open-form</u>	<u>Closed-form</u>
exterior locations	interior locations
mobile framing	static framing
bright, natural lighting	darkness, shadows
long-shots	close-ups
timelessness	temporality

As Naficy points out however, this demarcation is not intended to be inflexible or overly divisive, for like the conditions of exile and diaspora themselves, there is a great deal of overlap involved. Some "accented" films, such as *Yol* (Yilmaz Güney, 1982, Turkey/Switzerland/France) for instance, envision the homeland itself (in this case Turkey) as a prison. Open-form chronotopic films nonetheless commonly lend themselves to nostalgic, utopian and optimistic interpretations, while closed-form chronotopic films inevitably encourage dystopian and pessimistic readings.

"Accented" films which embody *both* open-form and closed-form chronotopes on the other hand, argues Naficy, are evocative of Edward Soja's concept of 'thirdspace', which Naficy describes as a "slipzone of simultaneity and intertextuality, [where] original cultures are no longer fixed."<sup>13</sup> While the filmmakers in question can certainly be thought of as inhabiting a thirdspace of sorts, insofar as they belong wholly to neither the host country in which they reside, nor to the homeland which they have left, it is debatable to what extent their films inhabit this slipzone. Some of the films Naficy provides as examples of thirdspace chronotopicality, such as *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967, USA/Canada) and *The Great Sadness of Zohara* (Nina Menkes, 1983, Israel/Morocco), seem to show a *transition* from closed-form chronotopicality to

open-form chronotopicality, rather than a *synthesis* of the two forms to create a utopian 'thirdspace'; whereas other examples, such as *Calendar* (Atom Egoyan, 1993, Armenia/Canada/Germany) and *A Tale of the Wind* (Joris Iven, 1988, France/UK/West Germany/Netherlands), seem to display a genuine oscillation between open-form and closed-form chronotopicality. By making thirdspace films, or acting "thirdly or interstitially" as Naficy puts it, their makers "resist both absolute essentialism and total integration to produce, instead, partiality and positionality", making the filmmakers and the films themselves "moving targets, strategically adopting not only marginality and interstitiality but also at times *centrality* [my emphasis]."14

One of the foremost contributions Naficy has thus made to the study of exilic and diasporic cinema has actually been to differentiate with great subtlety between the concepts of exile and diaspora themselves. For as obvious as such a distinction may be, the terms are all too frequently conflated with each other. 'Exile' therefore, as Naficy explains, refers to "individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin, and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places and cultures". Although it can be collective, exile is thus primarily a solitary or individual experience, in which the exile (or group of exiles) in question maintain a "vertical and primary relationship" with their homeland, unlike people living in diaspora, whose consciousness is "horizontal and multisited, involving not only the homeland but also compatriot communities elsewhere." Diaspora in other words, is collective by necessity. These important differences manifest themselves both thematically and aesthetically, explains Naficy, in exilic films on the one hand, which are characterised by their "narratives of retrospection, loss, and absence", as well as their emphasis on "binarism and duality", and a "cathected" relationship with the homeland; and in diasporic films on the other hand, which are characterised by their emphasis on "plurality, multiplicity, and hybridity", and the "performativity of identity". This is not to suggest however that diasporic films do not also foster a

vertical relationship to the homeland, while simultaneously encouraging a "lateral relationship" to fellow diasporic communities, compatriot or otherwise.

Postcolonial ethnic and identity films by contrast are characterised by their overriding concern with "the exigencies of life *here* and *now* [my emphasis] in the country in which the filmmakers reside." In their films, Naficy argues, there is no nostalgic longing for the homeland, but instead an *accentuation* (pun very much intended) on the process of assimilation or of "becoming", of becoming African-British, Chinese-American etc., what Naficy refers to as the "politics of the hyphen".<sup>15</sup>

Naficy posits a somewhat similar trichotomy in his writings on Iranian exilic television in Los Angeles. The first category, or stage rather, is exilic (programs produced by exiles living in the host country as a response to and in parallel with their own transitional and provisional status), the second transnational (programs imported from the homeland), and the third ethnic (programs produced in the host country by long-established indigenous minorities). Iranian *exilic* television therefore, by the nature of its very longevity, is in the process of becoming *ethnic*.<sup>16</sup>

In this respect Naficy's work represents an important milestone in what is an ongoing academic debate regarding the nature of exile and diaspora. As indicated above, it is a debate characterised by a tension between a decidedly essentialist and monolithic theorisation of both terms, and a more subtle and open-ended attempt at understanding how different exilic and diasporic subjects are affected by the experience of displacement in different ways. Edward Said's celebrated essay "Reflections on Exile" for instance, is one of the most influential pieces written on the subject of exile. Despite the value of Said's understanding of exile as mode of opposition to political, social and cultural orthodoxy however, he makes a number of sweepingly negative generalisations about exiles themselves, while the connotations he ascribes to the term or 'condition' itself are equally unrelenting in their cynicism:

Exile is a jealous state....Exiles look at non-exiles with resentment.... No matter how well they may do, exiles are always eccentrics.... Wilfulness, exaggeration, overstatement: these are characteristic of being an exile.... Composure and serenity are the last things associated with the works of exiles....Artists in exile are decidedly unpleasant....<sup>17</sup>

Such statements in any other context would most likely be interpreted as prejudice or outright hatemongering. This is not to say that Said's comments are necessarily untrue, rather that they are only true at certain times, under certain circumstances, and for certain groups or individuals. Said's intention seems to be to *define* rather than to *delineate*<sup>18</sup> the experience and the concept of exile, in a manner that is not conducive to a deeper understanding of its manifold variations and complexities. As Zuzana M. Pick observes in her analysis of Chilean Cinema in exile from 1973-86, not all exiles respond to their own displacement in a negative or defeatist manner. Indeed, many Chilean filmmakers she argues consciously emphasised an exilic sensibility in their works, both individual and collective in nature, as a means of maintaining their political and social agency and countering their cultural disenfranchisement. Such a strategy moreover represents an inherent unwillingness to conform to the negative and harmful stereotypes associated with the condition of exile itself.

If one looks at the "catalogue" of films made by Chileans since 1973, the foregrounding of a consciousness of exile is paramount to the repositioning of works within a social political and historical formation. This re-positioning implies a refusal to comply with the negative consequences of banishment. The disorienting alienation and marginality tend to prevent the exile from having an effect on a social and political context. By recognizing the privilege that the position of exile brings along, filmmakers have re-defined their practice as a means of cultural struggle. What I call the privilege of exile is the awareness of the possibility of this process. The capacity for operating dialectically within the heterogeneous allows the reaffirmation of political commitment and the re-contextualization as individual and collective identity.<sup>19</sup>

Some academics are perhaps guilty of exaggerating what Pick calls the "privilege of exile", the liberating effect and the positive aspects of the cultural and aesthetic hybridity that the experience of displacement and socio-political marginalisation entails. See for example Laura U. Marks somewhat overly playful assertion that the "minority artist *dances* along the border [my emphasis]", in her essay "A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema".<sup>20</sup> Such arguments are vital however to countering an unremittingly negative and monolithic understanding of the concept of exile itself. In this respect Winifred Woodhull has also usefully stressed the need to distinguish between, in her case, the various reasons for the relocation of many exiled 'intellectuals' to France in recent years:

[I]t is essential to draw distinctions within and between groups of émigré intellectuals who have come to France at different times and in various circumstances: those from other Western European countries, or from the U.S. and Canada, who have come mainly for reasons of intellectual and cultural affinity....and those for whom oppression in their native land is a central factor....those who have come from Eastern European countries as political and intellectual dissidents....and those who have come from Third World countries, particularly former colonies....to take up residence in France permanently or intermittently, for political, cultural, and intellectual reasons. Exile means something different in each case, and figures in the work of these individuals and groups in very different ways.<sup>21</sup>

One of the weaknesses underlying most academic writing on the subject of exile in general nonetheless, as Said, Pick and Woodhull's arguments illustrate, is that it concerns itself primarily with the exilic works of so-called 'intellectual' émigrés. It is perhaps a truism to observe that the only exiles or group of exiles whose experiences of displacement garner the most attention are those who possess the ability to articulate or express their opinions and feelings on the subject, via the medium of cinema, music, literature etc. It is important to note however that the works of these 'intellectuals' do not necessarily speak for the many émigrés who suffer – or indeed celebrate – their exilic existences in silence.

The developments in the debate regarding the concept of diaspora parallel the arguments outlined above considerably. While exile may be a relatively straightforward concept to define however – it is always either external or internal, forced or voluntary – there has by contrast been a great deal of uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding debates about the concept of diaspora, which arguably is reflective of the intangible and amorphous nature of the condition itself. Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton's differentiation therefore between the concepts of 'exile' and 'diaspora', and the connotations that came to be associated with both terms following the creation of Israel in 1948 is especially useful:

[E]xile connoted suffering, a negative term evoking displacement, refugee status, and above all the myth of an eventual, and possibly soon, return. In contrast, diaspora came to mean a chosen geography and identity. Exile was largely revered for the cultural stamina of the exiled, their constant loyalty to the historical memory of the communal life, rejection of assimilation, and struggle for authenticity and sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

For Barkan and Shelton therefore, diaspora implies a certain degree of belonging and rootedness that the concept of exile does not. Some however have attempted to define diaspora

in a far more comprehensive manner. In the first edition of the journal *Diaspora* for example, William Safran sets out a rather restrictive set of criteria, which an individual or group of people must fulfil in order to qualify as a diasporic community or member thereof.<sup>23</sup> Such prescriptive definitions nevertheless are hardly practical, and fail to take into consideration the historical contingencies and particularities that are bound up with the establishment of any diasporic community. James Clifford's seminal essay, entitled simply "Diasporas", therefore represents an important step towards thinking constructively not only about how distinct diasporic communities come into being, but also how they continue to develop after their formation:

What is the range of differences covered by the term [diaspora]? Where does it begin to lose definition?....[W]e should be wary of constructing our working definition of a term like diaspora by recourse to an "ideal type", which the consequence that groups become identified as more or less diasporic, having only two, or three, or four of the basic six features....Moreover at different times in their history, societies may wax and wane in their diasporism, depending on changing possibilities – obstacles, openings, antagonisms, and connections - in their host countries and transnationally.... Whatever the working list of diasporic features, no society can be expected to qualify on all counts, throughout its history. And the discourse of diaspora will necessarily be modified as it is translated and adopted....Different diasporic maps of displacement and connection can be compared on the basis of family resemblance, of shared elements, no subset of which is defined as essential to the discourse. A polythetic field would seem most conducive to tracking (rather than policing) the contemporary range of diasporic forms.<sup>24</sup>

For Clifford, diaspora is volatile condition, constantly shifting, yet at the same time traceable. As he asserts, if "diaspora is to be something about which one could write a history....it must be something more than a name for a site of multiple displacements and reconstitutions of identity",<sup>25</sup> echoing Stuart Hall's criticism of the "superficiality of old style pluralism where no boundaries are crossed...the trendy nomadic voyaging of the postmodern or simplistic versions of global homogenisation – one damn thing after another or the difference that doesn't make a difference."<sup>26</sup> In a similar fashion, Avtar Brah has argued eloquently and cogently for the need to historicise the experience of displacement for each respective diasporic community. Furthermore, she points towards the need for a *pan-diasporic* sensibility on the part of diasporic and non-diasporic subjects alike, to better comprehend the differences and similarities between distinct diasporic groups:

The question is not simply about *who travels* but *when, how, and under what circumstances*? What socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions mark the trajectories of these journeys? What regimes of power inscribe the formation of a specific diaspora? In other words, it is necessary to analyse what makes one diasporic formation similar to or different from another: whether, for instance, the diaspora in question was constituted through conquest and colonisation as has been the case with several European diasporas. Or it might have resulted from the capture or removal of a group through slavery or systems of indentured labour....the *concept* of diaspora concerns the historically variable forms of *relationality* within and between diasporic formations. It is about relations of power that similarise and differentiate between and across changing diasporic formations. In other words, the concept of diaspora centres on the *configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*.<sup>27</sup>

The structure and methodology of this chapter displays a clear commitment to the kind of relational approach that Brah recommends, striving as it does to bring the films considered below into relation with each other at the same time as it recognises the considerable differences between them. Such a commitment to relationality certainly seems to inform Naficy's methodological approach also, as he utilises his proposed chronotopic paradigm to draw many enlightening parallels between a number of "accented" filmmakers and their works. Moreover, as Naficy is careful to remind the reader, exile and diaspora are not mutually exclusive processes. They are instead "fluid processes that under certain circumstances may transform into one another and beyond".<sup>28</sup> Despite this welcome insistence on the need for locating different exilic and diasporic individuals or groups within their specific historical trajectories however, it is precisely the wide-ranging scope of Naficy's book that, somewhat ironically, undermines some of the finer theoretical points of his work. For by attempting to incorporate all of the diverse forms of exilic and diasporic filmmaking under the rubric of "accented cinema", Naficy's work betrays an underlying aesthetic and theoretical determinism, indicated partly by his insistence on defining "accented cinema" *in opposition to*, rather than *in relation to*, mainstream Hollywood cinema. For Naficy, the relationship between "accented cinema" and Hollywood cinema is one of mutuality and dependency, for although the process of making "accented" films empowers their creators with a kind of self-determination, enabling them to "move out of their disempowered "minority" status, conferred upon them by the majority", all "accented cinema" itself ultimately does is supply "the sculpting lights that help define the major cinema's glowing visage".<sup>29</sup> To what extent this



argument is reconcilable with Naficy's earlier assertion that thirdspace "accented" films and filmmakers are occasionally able to adopt positions of centrality is clearly open to question.

Indeed as Alastair Phillips points out in his albeit largely complimentary *Screen* review of Naficy's book, despite the impressive wealth of background and contextual information provided for most of the films considered, *An Accented Cinema*, by attempting to comprise and impose some form of unity upon such a wide variety of filmmaking styles, threatens to oversimplify the complex nature of the relationship between non-mainstream, 'minor' cinemas and Hollywood cinema:

Although Naficy strives hard to clarify these specific histories, his work is also marked by the task of working towards a condensation or synthesis of the various tropes and principles operating in the largely minor cinemas he observes. And it is here that the broad dialectic between the marginal and the mainstream risks becoming too categorical... [W]e also need to see Hollywood and other dominant film cultures in their temporally specific and perhaps surprisingly varied transnational contexts. In so doing, we may find more meaningful ways of illuminating their own distinctive practices of production and consumption that move beyond such received notions as 'the classic realist text'...<sup>30</sup>

It certainly seems somewhat reductive to reduce the sheer wealth of exilic and diasporic filmmaking in the 'Western' hemisphere to a simplistic Hollywood/anti-Hollywood binary opposition. Firstly, because as Phillips argues, it overgeneralises and underestimates the complexity of mainstream Hollywood cinema on numerous levels; and secondly, because it condemns many "accented" films to their own secondariness. Although many of the films Naficy considers represent a clear challenge – aesthetic, economic and institutional in nature – to the ways in which Hollywood cinema entrenches itself both domestically and globally, surely any film which is made in or comes from a position of marginality, that is worth its salt so to speak, ultimately does more than simply offer itself up as some kind of alternative to mainstream Hollywood cinema. Naficy's argument also risks overlooking the frequently antagonistic nature of the relationship between "accented" cinema and the indigenous cinema of the particular host country from which it emanates. As is frequently the case the indigenous cinema of the host country in question is engaged in its own battle with the cultural and economic dominance of Hollywood cinema.

There also remains the question of for who precisely can this cinema be described as “accented”? Naficy is most likely aware, as an Iranian-American émigré living and working in the North America, that he is writing from a position of unparalleled economic and cultural imperialism on the part of the US. Moreover, the term “accented” certainly refers more to the unfamiliar narrative and aesthetic strategies that characterise so much exilic and diasporic filmmaking than it does to the actual ‘foreignness’ of the various languages to be found within these films. Yet one of the problems with the paradigm of “accented cinema”, and the dialectic Naficy proposes between mainstream and ‘minority’ filmmaking, is not so much that it presumes a complete familiarity with the codes and conventions of Hollywood filmmaking, or even that it over-exaggerates Hollywood’s domination of domestic and international film markets. Rather, it is that it takes for granted the degree of acceptance of these codes and conventions on the part of ‘Western’ audiences on the one hand, and the monolithic nature of Hollywood’s overwhelming presence in non-‘Western’, non-English speaking countries on the other, in a way that is being increasingly undermined in film studies overall. In a roundabout manner, the paradigm of “accented cinema”, somewhat perversely, merely serves to re-inscribe the global hegemony of Hollywood cinema at a conceptual level, as well as the division between East and West.

While the undeniable value of Naficy’s book therefore lies in its commitment to raising awareness and improving the reader’s knowledge and understanding of the international phenomenon that is the ever-increasing body of work made by displaced filmmakers from all over the world, as well as the modes of production, recurrent thematic concerns and stylistic features that connect them together to varying degrees, I am hesitant to relinquish the term “accented cinema” from the boundaries of the quotation marks with which I have thus far chosen to circumscribe it throughout this chapter. Like its Third Cinema counterpart, which since its inception has been the subject of a constant theoretical re-evaluation, the term “accented cinema” seems potentially far too broad a term to be of any practical use when considering the countless films that in a variety of ways fall under its rubric. The term “accented cinema” refers potentially to

films from anywhere in the world, and covers a period of time ranging in Naficy's book from as early as 1949 (*Lost, Lost, Lost* (Jonas Mekas, USA, not completed until 1976!)) and even earlier, right up until present-day "accented cinema" and certainly beyond – an ambitious scope on enquiry to say the least. As an idea or concept, "accented cinema" is certainly useful, firstly as a means of identifying the particular modes of production, common themes and aesthetic practices that undoubtedly distinguish many exilic and diasporic films; and secondly, and most importantly, because it proposes a new set of viewing skills (which include such diverse acts as reading, listening, translating and writing) that are necessary to more fully understand and appreciate the difficult and problematic nature of these films. The term also implies a more nuanced understanding of the concept of national cinema itself, by pointing to the existence of filmmakers and filmmaking collectives that operate at an almost subnational level, a point that as I have already argued is nevertheless largely undermined by Naficy's insistence on positioning "accented cinema" so strongly in opposition to Hollywood cinema. But to recognise the term "accented cinema" as a genre or filmic movement unto itself – despite Naficy's warning against "positing an all-encompassing grand Exile or great Diaspora", and regardless of the use of quotation marks, italics and capitalised letters in general – runs the risk of transforming it into a totalising category that paradoxically essentialises the very films it originally intended to make more specific. As Naficy himself rightly observes after all, these "accented" films are "moving targets", they cannot be easily pinned down or comfortably categorised, for to do so would be contrary to and to deny them their itinerant nature. It is an unfortunate paradox that a work so strongly committed to tracing the shifting trajectories of exilic and diasporic cinema should seek to *situate* this cinema so strongly in opposition to mainstream filmmaking. As Homi K. Bhabha might put it, exilic and diasporic films and filmmakers remind us that the 'nation' is "a liminal signifying space that is *internally* marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference." They can be perceived as "[c]ounter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalizing

boundaries – both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities. For the political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space.” Finally, exilic and diasporic films provide a “way of understanding how easily the boundary that secures the cohesive limits of the Western nation may imperceptibly turn into a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent.”<sup>31</sup>

The analysis of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema undertaken in this chapter therefore does not attempt to position this cinema in opposition to mainstream Hollywood or any other dominant mode of filmmaking, or to identify a range of defining aesthetic traits and thematic motifs that run throughout these films. Rather it attempts to explore and compare broadly the different ways in which Iranian émigré filmmakers have depicted the experience of displacement in their films, and what these differences may suggest about the changing attitudes of the filmmakers themselves towards the condition of living in exile and diaspora. As noted above, this chapter aims to demonstrate how Iranian émigré filmmaking is characterised largely by a gradual, historical shift from a predominantly invariable and myopic outlook to a wider, pan-diasporic perspective. One of the potential problems with this argument of course is that it threatens merely to substitute one homogenising paradigm for another, replacing “accented cinema” with my own linear Grand Narrative. Without wishing to impose too strict a chronological trajectory upon these films however, hopefully such a relatively open analytical schema will guard against any overgeneralisations, and allow these films to *speak for themselves* as it were, in a manner that attempting to shoehorn them into the totalising category of “accented cinema” does not necessarily permit. Moreover, as was also noted in the introduction, the individual case studies of Amir Naderi’s New York films and Sohrab Shahid Saless’ German films in chapters three and four respectively, are intended to provide a counterpoint to some of the methodological problems that inevitably underlie such a collective and comparative analysis.

This rest of this chapter therefore in a sense attempts to outline the path that exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema has forged for itself over past twenty-five years, beginning with its immediate break with indigenous Iranian cinema; to one of its most recent and well-known incarnations, as Hollywood's vision of the Iranian experience of displacement, in the Oscar-nominated film *House of Sand and Fog*. It would be somewhat counterproductive nonetheless to view these two locations (Iran and Hollywood) as strict nodal points, to view the aforementioned overall shift in Iranian émigré filmmaking, from a strictly exilic to an openly pan-diasporic outlook, as in any way a straightforward or linear transition. For the path that Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora has forged for itself during its relatively brief history is a circuitous and, despite the largely chronological emphasis of this chapter, a profoundly non-linear one. Rather at certain points along this path, certain films have focused on the exigencies of life in exile and diaspora in ways that directly challenge a fixed or essentialised notion of identity, opening up traditional understandings of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema to even broader perspectives, as well as exposing some of the limitations of the concept of 'national cinema' itself as an organisational category. It is with these someplaces in-between therefore that the rest of this chapter principally concerns itself.

**"a journey without end": *The Mission, Guests of the Hotel Astoria & Nightsongs***

We begin then with three films that are separated from each other by differences in location and subject matter, and yet are linked, firstly by the fact that they were all made within the decade immediately following the Iranian Revolution, and secondly because they all reach remarkably similar conclusions regarding the affects of displacement upon their respective protagonists (particularly in relation to the symbolic closing shots of the first two films that are considered below). *The Mission*, mentioned above, follows the efforts of an assassin, Daoud Moslemi (Houshang Touzie) – who works for the mysterious 'Organisation' – to kill an ex-SAVAK army Colonel (Parviz Sayyad, also the director of the film), now residing in New York city; *Guests*

of *the Hotel Astoria* (Reza Allahmehzadeh, 1989, USA/Netherlands) examines the various misfortunes of a group of Iranian exiles all interminably awaiting the arrival of their visas, their relatives, and any news from home, in the Hotel Astoria in Istanbul, Turkey; while *Nightsongs* focuses on the events in the lives of a Chinese-American family and their Chinese-Vietnamese cousin living New York's Chinatown. Even though *Nightsongs* does not take a specifically Iranian experience of displacement as its subject matter therefore, the fact that it is directed by an Iranian émigré, and manifests a distinctly exilic sensibility akin to the outlook of the other two films considered in this section, distinguishes it as one of the foremost examples of an incipient exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema.

The first of these films, *The Mission*, is strikingly reminiscent of earlier thrillers *The Day of the Jackal* (Fred Zinnemann, 1973, UK/France), in terms of its subject matter, and existential thriller *The Driver* (Walter Hill, 1978, USA), in terms of its overall tone, and the way in which it seemingly reduces its characters to the status of mere ciphers. Indeed, it is noteworthy that even though we learn the assassin's real name, the film's end credits list Houshang Touzie's character merely as 'The Missioner'. Similarly, Parviz Sayyad's character is listed as 'The Colonel', and is never referred to by his actual name throughout the entire film. Neither do we learn the real name of 'His Eminence', Daoud's superior in New York, whose orders Daoud has been instructed to obey unquestioningly by the 'Organisation'. In *The Driver*, characters are likewise identified simply by their profession or by the function they perform (in the narrative, in society at large) rather than their actual names (so that the film's two lead actors, Ryan O'Neal and Bruce Dern, are referred to only as 'The Driver' and 'The Detective' respectively, and so on).

The numerous exchanges throughout *The Mission*, between Daoud on the one hand and the Colonel's sister-in-law Maliheh (Mary Apick) on the other, in which they debate heatedly the pros and cons of the Iranian Revolution, demonstrates the extent to which the two characters represent opposing ends of the film's ideological spectrum. As Sheila Johnston observes in her *Monthly Film Bulletin* review of the film, it sets up an apparently explicit contrast between "the

strict principles of Islamic orthodoxy” – represented by Daoud and His Eminence – and “Westernized liberalism” – represented by the characters of the Colonel and Maliheh.<sup>32</sup>

Reinforcing the idea that these characters are essentially types rather than fully rounded individuals, these exchanges between Daoud and Maliheh – in which Maliheh emerges as the most lucid and persuasive – though convincingly written and well acted, betray the film’s tendency to didacticism.

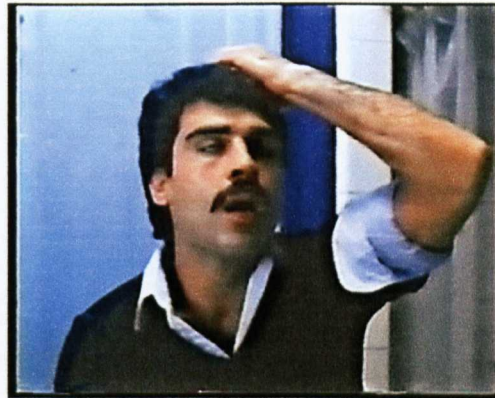
Similar to *The Driver* nevertheless, *The Mission* complicates the perception of its characters as nothing more than one-dimensional symbols of existential isolationism, primarily through the sympathetic performances of its three central protagonists. Johnston for example goes on to note how “Sayyad’s own engaging performance as the Colonel leaves little doubt as to where our sympathies are meant to lie”<sup>33</sup> in the film’s overall ideological schema. Yet Touzie’s performance as the assassin Daoud, is if not more, than at least equally affecting, conveying powerfully the ethical and spiritual crisis Daoud undergoes as he unintentionally befriends the Colonel and his family, after rescuing the Colonel one evening from some muggers in a subway station. A later scene, in which a brief smile flickers faintly, almost reluctantly across Daoud’s face as the Colonel laughs out loud upon realising that the piece of paper stuck on the windscreen of his car is an advertising flyer rather than a parking ticket, reveals subtly Daoud’s growing fondness for the Colonel. As Daoud learns more about the Colonel’s background and character, and furthermore that the Colonel intends to publish a book revealing the names of corrupt clergy members in Iran, so he begins to question the right of ‘His Eminence’ and the ‘Organization’ – whose authority he had previously accepted blindly – to command him to kill what in his own judgement appears to be an innocent man.

Indeed, the film takes great care to differentiate between the religious fundamentalism of the Iranian regime – the violent actions of which are never shown, but merely referred to through the dialogue between the characters – and the piety of Daoud himself. When Daoud arrives at his hideout for instance – a cockroach-ridden apartment – at the beginning of the film, he is shown

dutifully writing a letter to his mother, and performing his prayers to Mecca with a gentleness and attention to detail that is more suggestive of peaceful devoutness than it is fanaticism or extremism. The care and intricacy with which he performs his ablutions prior to praying is also mirrored by the way in which the camera understatedly, respectfully frames each stage of the ritual in a series of measured, static shots, as he washes his hands, forearms, feet and head (figs 1-8).



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**



**Figure 3**



**Figure 4**





Figure 5

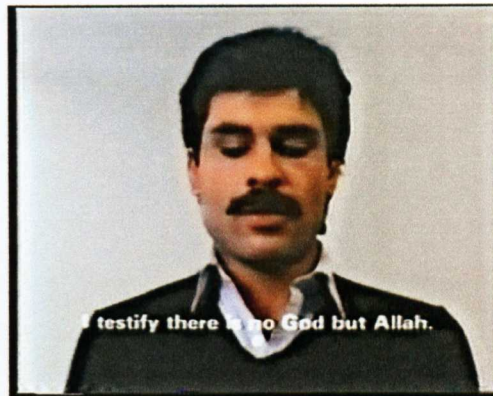


Figure 6

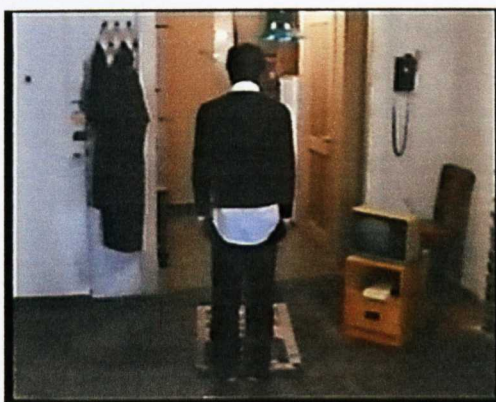


Figure 7



Figure 8

Daoud's austere piety is also conveyed through his behaviour in general; through his hesitancy to shake the hand of Maliheh upon first meeting her; through his refusal to drink alcohol or eat pork (in one scene removing the sausage from a hot dog roll, for fear it might be made of pork, despite the assurances of the street vendor from whom he purchases it that it is not!); and also through the simplicity of the meals he prepares for himself (invariably fried eggs and bread). Moreover, Daoud is strongly differentiated from the other morally corrupt and spiritually deficient members of the 'Organization'; not only 'His Eminence', who it is strongly suggested orders the Colonel to be murdered for personal motives rather than on orders from the 'Organization' itself (he fears the Colonel might reveal him as an informer for the Shah's regime in Iran), but also his contact in New York, Ghaffar (Kamran Nozad). The small apartment in which Daoud lives and performs his prayers for example contrasts starkly with the opulent surroundings of the abode of

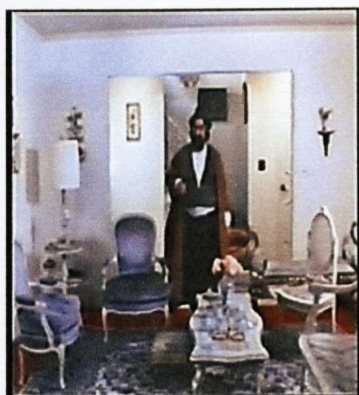


Figure 9

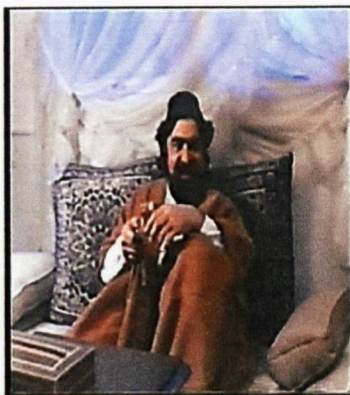


Figure 10



Figure 11

'His Eminence' (figs 9 and 10), while Daoud's humble piety finds its opposite, not in the figures of the Colonel or Maliheh, but rather in Ghaffar himself, who guzzles greedily on bottles of beer as he implicitly threatens Daoud that he will be killed if he fails to execute the Colonel by a certain deadline (fig. 11).

Daoud's moral and ideological distinction from his 'superiors' is further reinforced towards the end of the film, when he reveals that he was discharged from the army in Iran and tortured for refusing to open fire on a group of students holding a sit-in protest. Despite the film's obvious sensitivity therefore towards the predicament of the Colonel and his family, its equally subtle portrayal of Daoud's dilemma reveals it as far from trying to align the viewer's complete sympathy with any one specific character or belief system. The film is far more interested in exploring shades of grey than it is in setting up a strict opposition between black and white, right and wrong. As Daoud himself remarks when he informs Ghaffar that he will not kill the Colonel unless 'His Eminence' or the 'Organization' furnish him with proof of the threat the Colonel poses to the Iranian government: "[I]t's not clear who is the hunter and who is the prey."

Daoud's disenchantment with the purpose and justness of his mission is furthermore not simply depicted as some kind of gradual conversion to liberal individualism or the 'American way of life'. Although Iran itself is quite clearly coded as a fanatical and violent country, the film does not portray the United States as somehow innately superior, or as a liberal utopia. The Colonel



refers to it as a “jungle” in which everyone is either too scared or uncaring to help others, while Maliheh makes a similar observation upon thanking Daoud for rescuing her brother-in-law from the muggers in the subway station, remarking that seemingly he has not yet become “Americanized”. Rather Daoud’s reluctance to carry out the assassination is paralleled by his increasing alienation from, yet growing fascination with, the society in which he finds himself. It is by no means insignificant that after performing his prayers for the first time in the film, we witness Daoud’s first interaction with US culture; namely, watching the movie *Bus Stop* (Joshua Logan, 1956, USA), starring perhaps *the* Hollywood symbol of Americana, Marilyn Monroe – and all the connotations of sexuality, celebrity, glamour and tragedy that her star image encompasses – on the television in his apartment. Rather than serving to juxtapose crudely Daoud’s asceticism and subdued religiosity with the crass consumerism and commercialism of Hollywood cinema however, the scene marks the beginning of Daoud’s ambiguous relationship to US culture itself. There seems something significant in the fact for instance that Daoud watches *Bus Stop*, a film that was originally shot in Cinemascope and Deluxe Colour, on a small, dingy, black-and-white television screen (fig. 12). By distorting the film’s original appearance, by drastically reducing the size of the image and draining it of all its vibrancy, the television puts a kind of distance between Daoud and the image, despite Daoud’s attempts to get to literally *get closer to it* (he sits cross-legged on the floor like a child, his face right up close to the screen (fig. 13)).



Figure 12



Figure 13

This ambiguous closeness to and yet distance from US culture and society is echoed in several other shots later in the film, particularly in the montage sequence which shows Daoud exploring New York as he waits for proof from either 'His Eminence' or the 'Organization' of the Colonel's guilt. Symbolically heavy-handed shots of Daoud leaning anguishedly against a rail fence (fig.14), separating him from the New York skyline in the distance, or wandering the streets of New York aimlessly (fig. 15), the camera positioned at a low angle so as to emphasise the height of the buildings looming over him, are gradually replaced by less overwrought images of Daoud buying by a giant pretzel from a fast-food stall (fig. 16), and staring longingly at the woman who serves him in the store where he purchases some clothes, her long blonde hair flowing over her shoulders (figs 17–18).

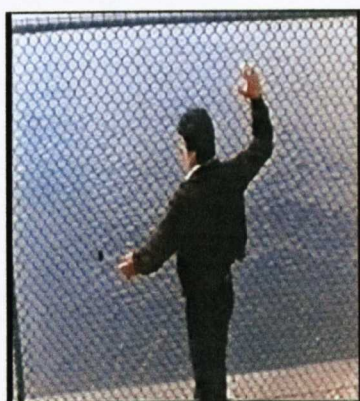


Figure 14

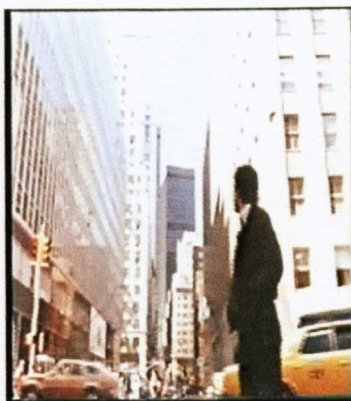


Figure 15



Figure 16

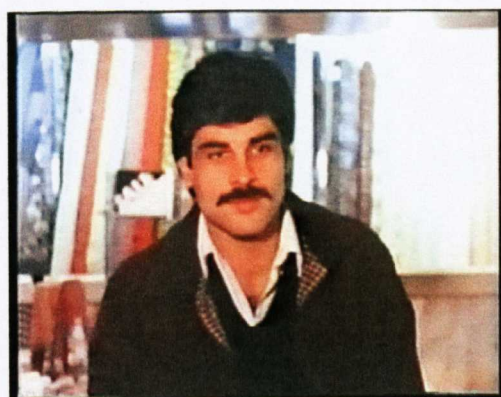


Figure 17



Figure 18



During these scenes the film reduces the United States to a series of iconic images or simulacra (Marilyn Monroe, giant pretzels, skyscrapers and the New York skyline), though the overall effect serves more to illustrate Daoud's inability to see or reach beyond the surface of US society than it does to provide an apparently authentic, accurate picture of this culture. Indeed, Daoud's capacity to experience the US or New York only *at a remove* as it were – significantly by the act of consuming (buying and eating food, shopping for clothes) – resembles the way in which the Colonel and Maliheh are similarly reduced to 'experiencing' Iran by consuming images, through viewing photographic slides of their homeland, which they are shown doing together



Figure 19

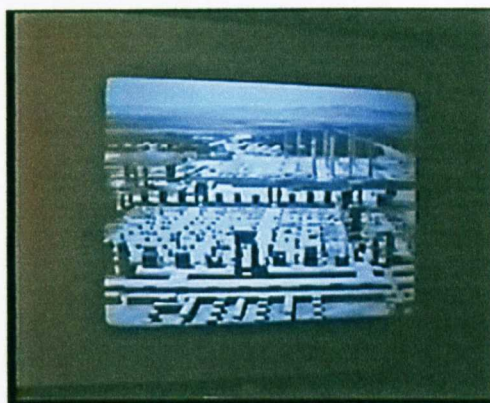


Figure 20

towards the film's end (figs 19 and 20). Although one character's actions represent his attempt to understand and engage with a *foreign culture* on the one hand, and the actions of the others their attempt to remember and maintain a link with their *homeland* on the other, the parallel is striking nonetheless.

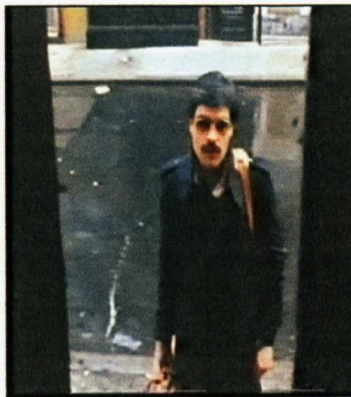
Ultimately Daoud's uncertainty and cultural dislocation lead to his downfall, as he decides not to proceed with the mission and return to Iran, and is killed in Kennedy Airport, presumably by 'His Eminence' or the 'Organization' for his insubordination. The US therefore offers no safe haven or refuge for either Daoud or the Colonel, for either the assassin or the target. The Colonel, finally realising that Daoud was an assassin sent to kill him, tells Maliheh there is no safe place for he or his family to hide, as they drive home from the morgue after identifying Daoud's body in the film's penultimate scene. The film's closing images show a new, nameless assassin arriving

at the address Daoud stayed at throughout the film, taking Daoud's place as it were, both physically and symbolically (figs 21–26). Their similarity in appearance (their clothes, sunglasses, baggage), as well as the identical pattern of shots and camera angles used to portray their respective arrivals, reinforces the sense that the characters are trapped in a cycle of violence.

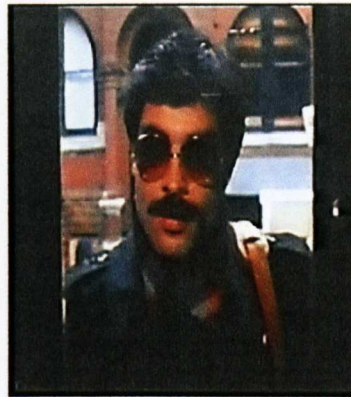
(Daoud's arrival)



**Figure 21**



**Figure 22**



**Figure 23**



**Figure 24**



**Figure 25**



**Figure 26**

*Guests of the Hotel Astoria* ends on a remarkably similar note, as its central female character Pari (Shohreh Aghdashloo) is also replaced, both physically and symbolically, by another nameless woman, who like Pari is mistakenly led to believe that giving birth to a child in the United States will establish legal residency for herself and her husband. The film ends, just





Figure 27

like *The Mission*, with a close-up of a nameless woman's face (fig. 27) as she smiles, presumably envisioning the happy future that awaits her and her family in the US. Indeed in both films there appears to be no escape from the vicious circles of violence and disappointment set in motion by the characters' displacement. The closing shots of

both films, the interchangeability of their respective characters and their various fates, furthermore serve as powerful images of the depersonalising and anonymising effects of displacement, though in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* this anonymity is partly due also to the unavoidably episodic nature of its narrative, and its large cast of characters. The film nevertheless focuses primarily on the efforts of Pari and Karim (Mohsen Marzen), first of all to claim political asylum in Holland, and when that fails, to establish residency in the US. Just as in *The Mission*, although Iran is never shown, it is once again coded as a brutal and violent country, through the dialogue spoken by the characters, as they relate their terrifying experiences of how they smuggled themselves into Turkey through treacherous mountain ranges; the letters which Mr. Taghi and Mrs. Mahin receive from their children, who are hospitalised and then imprisoned in Iran; the Farsi-language newspaper which Pari notices in the apartment of her friend upon her arrival in the US, which tells of how five leftist collaborators against the Iranian regime – one of them her lover Mr. Mohsehni (once again played by Houshang Touzie) – were executed in Iran; and especially the ominous performance of Marshall Manesh as Dr. Parto, the Farsi language translator for the Turkish police, and the character most clearly associated with the Iranian regime. An ex-SAVAK agent for the Shah, now working undercover for Khomeini's SAVAMA – (as he remarks significantly: "the two are the same") – he blackmails Pari into sleeping with the Turkish police when she and Karim are arrested, to save them both from imprisonment.

Turkey itself is portrayed in an equally unforgiving light. The touristic quality of the scenes that show Pari and Karim sightseeing (figs 28–30) in Istanbul as they go to apply for their visas



Figure 28



Figure 29



Figure 30

for Amsterdam – shots of them going on boat trips together and walking around Istanbul surrounded by pigeons – are quickly undermined by the corrupt characters they encounter, both inside and on those few occasions when they venture outside the hotel; from the Turkish police who perform midnight raids on the hotel, accepting bribes from the guests not to arrest them, to Turkish Ali, the counterfeiter who provides Pari and Karim with the papers and documents they need to leave the country, at extortionate rates. For the refugees seeking sanctuary in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria*, Turkey is portrayed as a country inhabited by crooked policemen and opportunistic human traffickers.

Amsterdam and the US fail once again however to provide a safe haven for the protagonists, in the second instance exclusively for Pari, who is misinformed by one of the hotel's other residents that establishing residency in the US is simply a matter of giving birth to a child there. After becoming pregnant as a result of her affair with Mohsehni (Karim believes the child to be his own) she successfully enters the US using a fake passport, in the false hope that she and Karim will be granted full legal residency when she gives birth. Indeed if *The Mission* concentrates primarily on the culture shock experienced as a result of displacement, then *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* focuses more on the bureaucratic problems facing immigrants when trying to claim political asylum or establish residency in another country, though at the expense of



character development, and without any particularly in-depth analysis of the actual legal difficulties involved. For instance, Pari and Karim are refused visas to enter Amsterdam without any explanation. Similarly, when they fail to claim political asylum upon arriving in Amsterdam airport, the viewer is briefly shown their subsequent interrogations and strip searches (figs 31 and



Figure 31



Figure 32

32), but never provided with any reason for their enforced return to Turkey. While the lack of an official explanation in both instances is certainly more likely to align the viewer's sympathy with Pari and Karim, who are equally clueless as to why they are refused asylum, and may give an impression of the haphazardness and cruelty of the international asylum system, it is characteristic of how the film overall offers little insight into how such a system actually works.

The lawyer who Pari and Tabatataii (the brother of Mrs. Zialli, who Pari initially stays with upon her arrival in the US) consult for advice on how Pari can establish legal residency, seems likewise intended more to offer a blackly comedic critique of the uncaring nature of the US legal system, than he does to offer any insight into US immigration policy. His meaningless repetition of the phrase "Y'know what I mean?", and the way he insensitively perceives Pari's death in childbirth as beneficial and advantageous to his efforts to help Karim obtain legal residency in the US, reinforce this view of his character.

The film does however offer an interesting, implicit critique of the economic and social marginalisation of other ethnic minorities in the US, by portraying the affinity between Pari and Mrs. Jones, the African-American woman whom Pari stays with after moving out of Tabatataii's

home. Mrs. Jones (fig. 33) is clearly coded as working class, by the way she dresses and the way she speaks, and with the exception of Tabatataii and his wife, is the only character that expresses any kind of sympathy for Pari's dilemma. It is also perhaps significant to observe that the janitor who exits the elevator when Tabatataii arrives at the hospital during Pari's childbirth is also African-American, unlike all of the hospital's administrative staff and doctors, and other white-collar workers encountered in the film.

Although the spectre of 'Iran' and the threat of return loom largely over all of the characters throughout the film, it is clear that the country itself, or the characters' memories of their homeland rather, act as a source of comfort to them during their displacement. Within the



Figure 33

hotel, the characters reminisce about Iran and 'experience' their homeland vicariously through television images and music. In certain respects the film is none-too-subtle in its portrayal of the traumatic effects of displacement. In one scene for instance Mr. Zialli (once again played by Kamran Nozad) collapses after drinking too much alcohol,

flailing about on the floor, wailing "I am oblivious!" (fig. 34). Nonetheless *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* effectively depicts the ennui and boredom of displacement, as the characters wait in the hotel for days, weeks and months on end, for information about their own future, and the fates of their families and friends. There is no strange fascination with the culture of the 'host' country, such as that displayed by Daoud in *The Mission*. Combined with the tragic and uncertain fates of so many of the film's characters – Pari's death, Mohsehni's execution, Parvin's turn to prostitution (Parvin is the daughter of Mr. and

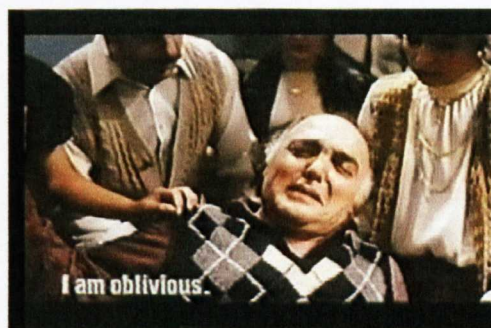


Figure 34

Mrs. Zialli), Mr. Taghi and Mrs. Mahin's attempted return to Iran to be with their children – its depiction of the consequences of displacement is overwhelmingly negative in tone. Whereas *The Mission* manages successfully however to interweave its heartfelt examination of the effects of cultural displacement with a compelling storyline, the dramatic impact of *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* is frequently (but not always) undercut by its one-dimensional characterisation, its multiple narratives, and the sheer number of scenarios it attempts to encompass. Somewhat fatally for the film, the most unilluminating and distracting of these scenarios is the central – yet tawdry and ultimately irrelevant – romantic liaison between Pari and Mohsehni itself.

Because of its narrower focus on the experiences of just one particular family, *Nightsongs* by contrast constitutes an altogether more nuanced and emotionally involving study of the traumatic effects of cultural displacement. Because the group of immigrants in this instance however are of Chinese origin rather than Iranian, the film, directed by Iranian émigré Marva Nabili, also significantly hints at the emergence of a pan-diasporic dimension to Iranian cinema in exile, although this dimension does not yet manifest itself as such within the diegetic world of the film. Unlike the residents of the Hotel Astoria, who are trapped both physically and symbolically in a state of temporariness and continual suspension, the characters in *Nightsongs* form a distinct diasporic community in the Chinatown of New York where they live and work. It is a community once again however that is fractured heavily along generational lines, the film charting the growing conflict between the teenager Fung Tak Men (David Lee), who is ostracised and bullied at school because of his race and inability to speak good English, and his parents, Fung Leung (Victor Wong) and Fung Lai Ping (Ida F. O. Chung). Tak Men's growing isolation and estrangement from his family is portrayed in a similar fashion to Daoud's social alienation in *The Mission*; namely, through numerous shots of Tak Men randomly wandering the streets of New York, itself a common trope for many exilic and diasporic films. Where *Nightsongs* differs slightly however is in the absence of any of the colourful street life that so strongly characterised Daoud's meanderings. There is no cultural allure or hidden delights on the lonely, bleak streets of



*Nightsongs*' New York, though the film does offer a similarly subtle critique of US consumerism, specifically when Tak Men examines the Japanese-themed display inside the window of what appears to be a Chinese department store. In the United States of *Nightsongs*, national culture is reduced to window dressing (fig. 35). There is nonetheless a gritty, desolate beauty to many of the shots of Tak Men walking around New York (fig. 36), which is reminiscent of Chantal



Figure 35



Figure 36

Akerman's *News From Home* (1977, France/Belgium/West Germany), and which when combined with the 'authentic', premodern, almost ethnographic quality of the traditional Chinese music playing on the soundtrack – which clashes noticeably with the film's contemporary urban setting – serves to enhance Tak Men's gradual withdrawal from the world around him.

The conflict between Tak Men and his parents however is not so much one of modernity versus tradition, but rather centres around Tak Men's descent into the gang culture and warfare that pervades his neighbourhood. Once again this conflict results in death (Tak Men's father is gunned down by rival gang members intending to kill Tak Men himself) and, in the figure of the film's central character, Tak Men's Chinese-Vietnamese cousin (Mabel Kwong), who comes to stay with the Fung family at the behest of her husband, an overwhelming sense not only of cultural, but also spiritual dislocation, and constant uncertainty about the future. Indeed, there is an ethereal quality to the character of Tak Men's cousin that is somewhat at odds with, but never threatens to undermine, the film's realist setting. As she arrives at the airport at the beginning of the film, her husband's voiceover narration – in the form of a letter written to his relatives in New

York – inform the viewer that that he has remained behind in a refugee camp in Malaysia to await news of the fate of their two sons, from whom they were separated during their flight from Vietnam. It provides hardly any information about his wife, not even her name, merely mentioning that she comes from an aristocratic background, a fact that is nonetheless important in subtly distinguishing her from the other members of the Fung family in general, and the humble, crowded surroundings of their household.

Like the Colonel in *The Mission*, Tak Men's cousin remains nameless throughout the entire film. Rather than threatening once again to reduce her character to the status of a mere cipher however, her anonymity, as well as her virtual silence throughout most of the film (she speaks on just a few occasions, and even then only briefly), lend her an air of mystery and transcendence, as if she is somehow beyond words or language, and serves to intensify the film's



Figure 37



Figure 38

portrayal of her private, spiritual unease. A strong sense of interiority, and of her detachment from the physical world around her, is also created by the frequent shots of her praying silently (figs 37 and 38), presumably for the safety of her husband and children, and the numerous internal monologues that punctuate the narrative, in the form of the poems that she writes in her journal (fig. 39).<sup>34</sup> In these poems she dreams of being

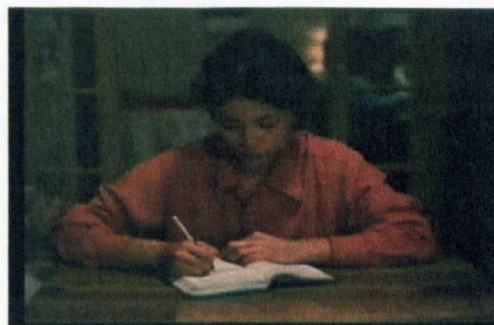


Figure 39

reunited with her husband, and envisions them both during happier times in their homeland.

Indeed, one of the most striking features of these poems is the way in which they repeatedly draw an explicit parallel between the loss of her homeland and her separation from her husband, and her yearning to be reunited with them both. Such an analogy is significant as it highlights the strongly feminist perspective of the film, a perspective that was lacking for instance in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* because of the scant psychological insight provided into that film's female characters, particularly Pari. The following extract from the journal of Tak Men's cousin for instance links the memory of her husband with the image of a river they used to walk alongside frequently, a vision that is returned to on numerous occasions during the film through her internal soliloquies:

I have on my shoulders a touch of silence,  
And the gaze of your eyes.  
I stand a witness to your hell.  
You travel to another place,  
Your world becomes a stolen grave.  
But I have no fear for you.  
Many nights we walked along the riverbank,  
The sound of the water, a long, cooling song.  
Watching the faint shadows of the boats brush the river,  
At dawn when the fishermen pulled in with their catch.  
The air was salt-warm, the sea-wind heavy on our faces.  
My heart moves along that riverbank.  
I have not heard from you my husband.  
Let me hear your voice vibrate in the still of the night,  
Let us speak.  
I *am* lonely.  
I think of you and this river that binds us.  
I wish to feel it upon my body.  
Its rhythm is my source.

By interweaving the sensual imagery of her homeland closely with the memory of her husband, the homeland is envisioned as a thoroughly masculine construct, inverting the traditional male traveller–motherland dichotomy, problematising what Janet Wolff has described as the notion that there is an “*intrinsic relationship between masculinity and travel*”.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, the way in which Tak Men's cousin is doubly displaced, out of place not only in the host society of the country in which she finds herself, but also within the family environment of the Fung household, recalls James Clifford's statement that life for women in diaspora can be “doubly painful –



struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile, with the demands of family and work, and with the claims of old and new patriarchies".<sup>36</sup> Despite the fact such a statement – and by extension, the film itself – risks reinforcing the stereotype that women are somehow inherently more spiritual than men, and even though Tak Men's cousin is not subject to any new patriarchal claims within the Fung household itself as such, both she and Mrs Fung (along with many other women from immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds) *are* subject to the manipulations of the seemingly kind but in fact exploitative manager of the sweatshop factory where they work, as well as the immigration authorities who randomly spot-check the factory and detain the female workers who lack the relevant identity papers. As Keya Ganguly has observed:

immigrant women are *subject-ed* by the double articulation of discourses of cultural difference and patriarchy. This makes their attempts to negotiate their selfhood in daily life both more interesting and perhaps more exemplary of the contradictory conditions within which subaltern experience is represented and lived.<sup>37</sup>

Tak Men's cousin also appears in a sense to act as his guardian angel. She literally watches over him at times (figs 40–42), albeit helplessly, as he becomes more deeply involved in his gang's criminal activities, while the fateful events leading up to the killing of Tak Men's father



Figure 40



Figure 41



Figure 42

are witnessed largely through her eyes. The scene in which she saves Tak Men from the bullet that kills his father moreover demonstrates an almost preternatural prescience on her part, which is further emphasised by the way in which the viewer's perspective is restricted during this scene. The viewer for instance never sees who shoots at Tak Men, while the sound of the gun firing is

likewise concealed by the sound of the firecrackers exploding in the Chinese New Year celebrations Tak Men and his family are watching. All we see instead is a medium close-up of both Tak Men and his cousin, Tak Men occupying the foreground of the screen, and his cousin – aptly enough – hovering just behind him over his shoulder (figs 43 and 44), also watching the



Figure 43



Figure 44

celebrations, until her eyes catch sight of something offscreen that clearly distresses her. She then dives on Tak Men and pushes him to the ground, saving his life, although the bullet hits his father as a result.

The almost wordless parting between Tak Men and his cousin at the bus station at the film's conclusion, as his cousin leaves not to be reunited with her own family, but instead to live with another surrogate family in San Francisco, further reinforces the impression that she is some kind of heavenly protector. After ascending the steps leading onto the bus, she turns around and looks down upon Tak Men affectionately one more time, her face framed by her flowing locks of black hair (fig. 45), before disappearing into the night.



Figure 45

If both *The Mission* and *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* therefore tended to emphasise the ideological and legalistic aspects of displacement respectively, then *Nightsongs*, by way of its anonymous and otherworldly portrayal of Tak Men's cousin, highlights its spiritual ramifications.



The fate of the characters – or survivors perhaps is more appropriate – of all three films is nevertheless evocative of the closing lines of the final rumination of Tak Men's cousin, as she departs for San Francisco. Torn from their homeland, with no place of comfort or refuge, and plagued ceaselessly by violence, death and uncertainty, they are all seemingly bound on "a journey without end".

All three films considered in this section therefore share a relentlessly negative view of the experience of displacement. It would be wrong to suggest however that taken collectively they amount to an entirely homogenous and undifferentiated view of life in exile. As the respective analyses above illustrate, *The Mission* and *Nightsongs* in particular depict the various effects of cultural dislocation with great insight and subtlety. Daoud's ambiguous relationship with US culture, as well as the physical and spiritual isolation of Tak Men's cousin from the people and the world around her, point towards some of the complexities and particularities of life in exile that challenge traditional monolithic understandings of the exilic experience. There is undoubtedly however an underlying determinism that serves to overwhelm the otherwise extremely nuanced portrayals of life in exile found in these early films of the exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema. Although *Nightsongs*, as noted above, in a sense represents the emergence of a pan-diasporic dimension in exilic Iranian filmmaking, none of the films considered above exhibit the kind of far-reaching diasporic sensibility that, as this chapter shall demonstrate, would come to characterise the works of other Iranian émigré filmmakers in the near future. As the films considered in the following section of this chapter seem to suggest, Iranian filmmakers working in exile and diaspora needed first to come to terms with their own hybrid senses of identity, before recognising the parallels between their respective experiences of displacement, as well as their relationality to the experiences of other diasporic groups, as a film such as *America So Beautiful* testifies.

### **Being in the Moment: *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* & *Walls of Sand***

[D]iaspora does not refer us to those scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland to which they must at all costs return.... This is the old, the imperialising, the hegemonising, form of 'ethnicity'.... The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference.<sup>38</sup>

(Stuart Hall)

Both *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (Caveh Zahedi, 1994, USA) and *Walls of Sand*, directed by US filmmaker Erica Jordan, but also co-produced, co-written and starring Iranian-American émigré Shirin Etessam, represent a significant development in exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking. Both made during the mid-90s, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the different backgrounds of the two filmmakers in question (Zahedi is a second-generation Iranian-American, while Shirin Etessam is an Iranian-born émigré working in the US), both films signal a shift away from a focus or meditation solely on the harmful and traumatic effects of displacement, to an emphasis on the possibilities for positive change, the need for self-adjustment, and a cautious optimism about the future. Indeed the films analysed thus far in this chapter all in their own particular way depict quite vividly the destructive effects of displacement upon family relations and the family unit. Both *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* and *Walls of Sand* by contrast, regardless of the different forms they employ – the former being ostensibly a documentary, the latter a more traditional dramatic narrative – emphasise the importance of the family as a source of personal strength, a site of reconciliation and hope, while also stressing the importance and complexity of individual identity.

*I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* opens with the film's director, Caveh Zahedi, directly addressing the camera, informing the viewer that the film they are about to watch has its origins in a screenplay he wrote two years ago during a family trip from Los Angeles to Las Vegas with his father Ali and his younger stepbrother Amin. The screenplay itself was based on his own transcriptions of the dialogue he recorded during that journey, a journey he and his family made

regularly ("every other weekend") when he was a child. Rather than attempt to re-enact that script however, explains Caveh, the film we are about to witness is an unscripted, though as it shall emerge, not wholly unpremeditated record of yet another trip to Las Vegas he and his family, along with his film crew, are about to undertake (according to the film's opening intertitles, Caveh's introductory monologue is recorded on the morning of Christmas Eve 1992, a mere few hours before they are due to leave together). Caveh describes the film and its improvisatory nature as primarily an "experiment in faith", an attempt to prove the existence of God by leaving the film open to chance or divine providence, allowing events to unfold naturally, and the film to take shape by itself as it were. It is moreover, he continues, a personal attempt to exorcise his own fears and frustrations about the lack of control over his life, and to try to work through his unwillingness to accept this lack of control. It gradually becomes clear that *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* also represents an attempt by Caveh to reconcile the contradictory feelings of love and resentment he bears towards his own father. Indeed the long, loud, angry scream that Caveh emits at the beginning of the film indicates to what a large extent the filmmaking process itself promises to be a form of emotional release for him. On two occasions during the lengthy car journey to Las Vegas for instance, Caveh speaks to the camera privately (fig. 46) while his family members are absent, confessing to the viewer the shame he feels towards his parents,



Figure 46

particularly his father. On one level this shame clearly has its basis in his father's ethnicity (he mentions for example his father's "funny accent"), and on another, culturally non-specific level, in what Caveh sees as his father's failings as a parent (later in the film he complains directly to his father of how he was never there for him when he was younger,

and how he never genuinely listens). Caveh also acknowledges his self-resentment, his sense of shame at his own faults, and the inherent paradox in wishing to show the viewer his father's

cultural peculiarities, as well as his shortcomings as a parent, while at the same time desiring to accept and come to terms with these peculiarities and shortcomings.

For all of the openness, emotional honesty and soul-baring with which the film confronts the viewer nonetheless, it is at equally great pains to undermine the legitimacy of the images unfolding on screen, and problematise the viewer's ability to readily accept the truthfulness of the events they are witnessing, a process that in no small way mirrors Caveh's own problematic search for the 'truth', his own difficulty accepting and bonding with his father. The very first shot of the film for instance, is reflective of how the film as a whole plays a variety of visual and aural tricks upon the viewer. Caveh's apparently unrehearsed, confused, rambling delivery and twitchy body language, in addition to the way in which he converses offhandedly with his film crew behind the camera and is framed slightly off-centre, occupying the right-hand side of the screen as he speaks, lend the film an air of randomness, spontaneity and realism from the outset. The power and ferocity of the aforementioned scream that accompanies the film's opening credits however – which fade in and out against a black background, disembodiment the scream from Caveh himself – is strikingly incongruous with the seemingly timid, thin, neurotic figure of a man that eventually confronts the viewer on screen (figs 47-50).



**Figure 47**



**Figure 48**





Figure 49



Figure 50

The numerous ways in which the film violates the conventions of traditional documentary filmmaking – even though it is immediately clear that this is by no means a typical documentary – also aims to confound the viewer. In addition to the extremely personal information Caveh divulges about himself, his family and his film crew, he also admits he is a sex addict, his father a former “womaniser”, and his soundwoman Denise a recovering alcoholic with whom he once had a sexual relationship (in his subsequent film, *In the Bathtub of the World* (2001, USA), Zahedi also openly admits to masturbating while fantasising sexually about one of the female students he teaches at film school). Indeed the extent to which Caveh tries to manipulate and implicate himself in proceedings is both far from objective and morally suspect; though it is certainly pertinent to one of his professed reasons for making the film in the first place, which is to test his own (un)willingness to surrender control over events. The most obvious example of Caveh's unethical control freakery occurs during the very uncomfortable and prolonged sequence set in his hotel room on Christmas Day after they have reached Las Vegas, in which he tries obstinately to persuade Ali and Amin to take ecstasy – which Caveh describes to them as a “love drug” – so they can all be more open and honest with each other. Through a deceptively subtle use of intertitles, the film works to cast doubt on the authenticity of the events that take place and the genuineness of all the participants involved. After failing to impose his own will upon both Ali and Amin for instance, Caveh takes the ecstasy himself, and asks for his father and stepbrother to wait with him until the drug begins to work. They eventually depart however, promising to return

before the ecstasy takes effect, leaving Caveh alone with his film crew. But when they return (later than promised, after Caveh is already high), both Ali and Amin seem more than willing, and even enthusiastic, to take part in Caveh's proposed shared drug experience. This is despite their initial reluctance to take the ecstasy for fear of the effect it might have on Ali's weak heart – a stance which significantly Caveh's film crew, notwithstanding their initial support for Caveh, ultimately sympathise with, further highlighting the diversity of moral opinion within the film. What follows, after another brief moment of hesitation over whether or not to take the ecstasy (due to the fact that Ali has consumed some alcohol during his absence), is a seemingly drug-induced three-way conversation between Caveh, Ali, and to a decidedly lesser extent Amin. During this conversation Caveh and his father speak quite candidly about their feelings towards one another, while Caveh and his stepbrother also converse without the hostility that marked their previous exchanges in the film.

Almost immediately after this emotional climax or moment of catharsis however, there follows a brief series of intercut monologues, apparently filmed on the morning after the previous night's shared drug experience, before the return journey to Los Angeles, in which Ali and Amin, as well as Caveh's film crew, share privately with the viewer their thoughts about the film. During this montage sequence the assistant cameraman Steve confesses that he thinks neither Ali nor Amin actually consumed the ecstasy the previous night (fig. 51). His belief is ostensibly backed up, yet at the same time contradicted to an extent, by the intertitle which appears during the film's end credits sequence, informing the viewer that after they have finished filming, Steve reveals to Caveh that he found (*only*) one ecstasy tablet in the wastebasket of Ali and Amin's hotel room (fig. 52). The uncertainty that this intertitle and Steve's comment instil in the viewer's mind regarding the sincerity of Ali and/or Amin's behaviour, prompts the viewer to consider whether or not they trust this information (and if they do not, why it is incorporated into the film at



Figure 51

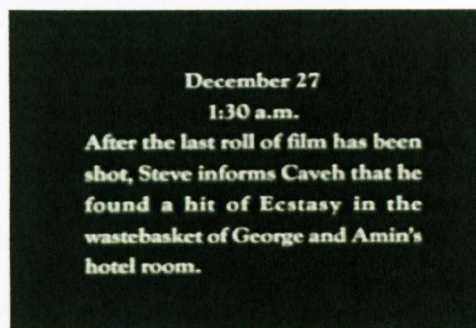


Figure 52

all). Denise after all clearly stated on camera earlier in the film that she saw Ali take his ecstasy tablet. So is Steve mistaken or lying, or was Denise herself complicit in Ali's (and Amin's?) deception? Any opinion the viewer might reach will undoubtedly have a bearing upon their understanding of the scenes they witnessed earlier in the film. On the one hand it clearly threatens to undermine the integrity and intimacy of these earlier scenes, insofar as either Ali or Amin (and perhaps Denise, or maybe all three of them) misled Caveh. On the other hand it may render these scenes all the more moving, in the sense that Ali and Amin both seemed genuinely to connect with Caveh emotionally (fig. 53), regardless of the fact that neither of them, or only one of them, consumed the ecstasy. The fact that we do not even witness Caveh taking an ecstasy tablet himself (does the Zahedi family collectively deceive Caveh's film crew perhaps?); Caveh's earlier assertion to his crew that prior to filming they agreed the film should be half documentary



Figure 53

and half re-enactment; the conflicting 'testimony' of Steve and Denise; the noticeably affected and artificial behaviour of Amin upon returning to the hotel room after Caveh has (seemingly) taken the ecstasy, in direct contrast to the apparent naturalism of Ali's 'performance' earlier in the film; all these factors combine to make reaching any degree of



certainty on the matter virtually impossible, just as Caveh's own attempt to prove the existence of God is in itself an instantly impossible undertaking.

The occurrence of certain technical 'failures', such as the loss of sound and image at vital points in the film, and the inclusion of these very failures into the finished product itself, also accumulate gradually to render ambiguous the trustworthiness of the film, and hence the

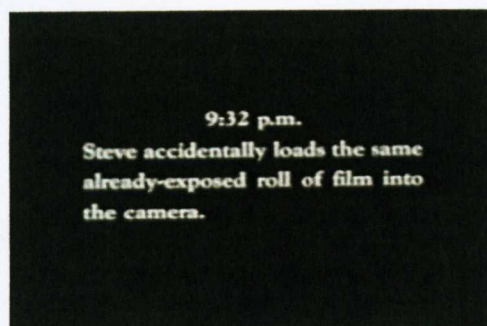


Figure 54

filmmakers themselves. At one point for example during the initial stages of the shared(?) drug experience, another intertitle appears, informing the viewer that Steve accidentally loads "the same already-exposed" roll of film into the camera (fig. 54). The resultant visual effect is an inverted image of Caveh, at first apparently lying in bed speaking to the camera, superimposed over the image of he and

his family sat on the sofa in his hotel room, obscuring our view of them as they talk to each other. The recurrence of this image at a later point in the film, *after* the shared drug experience, so that now it is the image of Caveh sat on the sofa with his family that appears inverted on screen, superimposed over the image of Caveh lying in bed addressing the camera directly, seemingly calls into question the chronology of the film itself, the very order in which the events themselves were recorded (figs. 55 and 56). Caveh Zahedi for instance has spoken openly of the way in which he intentionally altered the appearance of the film to give an impression of disorder and incompleteness:

Even filmically, I put in rollouts when they didn't really happen and I manipulated the images very drastically to give more failure than there was.<sup>39</sup>





Figure 55



Figure 56

Somewhat ironically nonetheless, and perhaps intentionally, these technical 'failures' have the effect of heightening the emotional impact of certain scenes. One the most moving moments in the film for example occurs after both Ali and Amin have deserted Caveh as he waits



Figure 57

for the ecstasy to take effect. When it finally does, and it becomes clear that they have not yet returned, there follows a shot of Greg Watkins, the main cameraman, comforting Caveh, who is visibly upset. The absence of any sound during this scene, or the conspicuous silence rather, puts the viewer at a distance from the brief moment of intimacy when

Greg and Caveh hug each other (fig. 57), lending the scene a sense of privacy, which stands out considerably in a film that has apparently been so emotionally candid and intrusive – albeit purposefully so – up until this point.

Through all of these manipulations and fabrications therefore, the film somewhat paradoxically arrives at some kind of emotional truth, in a way that is strikingly recollective of Sohrab Shahid Saless's description of cinema itself as a "very beautiful lie"<sup>40</sup>, and Abbas Kiarostami's suggestion that by analysing different aspects of the lie:

we can arrive at the truth. In cinema anything that can happen would be true. It doesn't have to correspond to reality, it doesn't have to "really" be happening. In cinema, by fabricating lies we may never reach the fundamental truth, but we will always be on our way to it. We can never get close to the truth except through lying.<sup>41</sup>

Despite the apparent contradiction at the heart of such a statement, such a filmmaking 'ethic' indeed appears to have informed Caveh's own film, and moreover provided Caveh himself with a sense of inner peace by the film's conclusion. As Naficy observes regarding the film, the journey "seems to have acted as an agent of family reconciliation and ethnic alignment for Zahedi."<sup>42</sup> Standing before the camera once more, offering his final thoughts on how the past few days have changed him, Caveh speaks touchingly of how he has finally learned to respect his father, mentioning one incident in particular when Ali gave Denise a bottle of wine as a gift, in spite of his knowledge of her drinking problem. His father's offering, explains Caveh, was not an act of stupidity or insensitivity, but rather represented his father's acceptance of Denise, regardless of whatever faults she may have. Caveh likewise seems more able by the film's end to accept himself, his father, and the lack of control over his own life. As Caveh remarks: "I feel like I can be in the moment now. And I am." His closing words are borne out in subsequent statements made in interviews after completing the film:

I've only sort of caught up with myself in the last year [1994]. With *A Little Stiff* [Zahedi's first feature film, 1991] I was always frustrated that I should have been further along. I should have been more famous, more respected, more appreciated, richer. It always felt like it wasn't enough. Whereas now I feel like I'm right where I need to be and I feel very good where I am. I feel like I'm home.<sup>43</sup>

Caveh nonetheless, can apparently not resist ending the film on a mischievously provocative note. As the film's final end credits roll, Caveh's voice emerges on the soundtrack, attempting to articulate his thoughts on what he believes to be the 'true' meaning of the film. After a series of false starts and hesitations however, he decides to begin again, and the sound of a tape recorder cutting out is audible on the soundtrack. Caveh's voice then emerges once more, and offers a far more coherent explanation of the meaning of the film, in which he metaphorically equates his own father with 'God', a poetic explanation that is nonetheless undercut by Caveh's final, irreverent exclamation of the word "anyway". The juxtaposition of these two versions of Caveh's account of the film – the first seemingly improvised, the second prepared – serves as a microcosm of the entire film itself, reminding the viewer, in spite of the emotional 'high' the film

concludes on, of the possible duplicity and ambiguity of the film they have just witnessed, and of the inherent dishonesty of the filmmaking process itself.

In spite of the similarly hopeful conclusion it reaches regarding the potential for change and acceptance on the part of its protagonist, *Walls of Sand* differs from *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*, insofar as it places a far greater emphasis on the specifically cultural aspects of its protagonist's disaffection and subsequent reconciliation with their family. The dilemma that confronts the Iranian-American Soroya (Shirine Etessam), in contrast to most of the protagonists of the films analysed thus far, is not one of resistance or aversion to cultural assimilation, but rather *overidentification* with US culture, and the tension this creates between Soroya and her more traditional Iranian family.

Soroya's overidentification with US culture is represented both physically and symbolically by the way she dresses – at the funeral of her uncle, Soroya is clearly differentiated from other members of her family by the contemporary clothing she wears, which contrasts starkly with the more conventional attire worn by her cousin Mitra – and also by her relationship with an American man, Chad, which Soroya believes to be the main reason for her cousin's rejection of her. The film begins where Soroya and Chad's relationship ends however, their break-up leaving Soroya with no place to live and, lacking a green card, no means of seeking employment. Culturally disenfranchised by both her family and US society, Soroya resorts to sleeping in her car, lying about her race to prospective employers, and attending self-help discussion groups in the seemingly vain hope of seeking some advice and guidance on her predicament.

At the same time, the film draws an explicit parallel between the cultural and economic isolation of Soroya, and the alienation of its other central female character, Ellen (Jan Carty Marsh), who suffers from agoraphobia. Ellen hires Soroya as an au pair for her son Alex, not knowing that Soroya has been lured into applying for the position by Ellen's ex-husband Tom, who is concerned for the welfare of Alex. In return for a job in his company and a legal green

card, Tom persuades Soraya effectively to spy on Ellen, and report back to him on any failings she may notice on Ellen's part with respect to Alex's upbringing.

Despite Soraya's initial concerns regarding the negative impact of Ellen's condition upon Alex (he is introverted and withdrawn, and performs badly at school), her occupancy of Ellen's household actually has a kind of therapeutic and liberatory effect upon Ellen herself. Although still confined largely to her bedroom and consumed with writing longing, unsent letters to her ex-husband, Ellen begins slowly to let her defences down and open up emotionally around Soraya. This psychological revival of sorts is conveyed visually by Ellen's increasingly relaxed and languorous body language, as well as the looser fitting and more informal clothing she begins to wear about the house, in contrast to her previously inhibited behaviour and stern, school-mistress appearance. In one of the film's central scenes – central in terms of importance as well as its position in the overall narrative – the film emphasises the connection between Soraya's presence and Ellen's growing openness, by crosscutting between images of Ellen taking a bath and Soraya secretly reading one of her letters, which itself speaks affectionately of the positive influence of Soraya's company. As Naficy observes, the sensuousness of the imagery, as well as the music and the voiceover that accompany it, spills over to infuse the relationship between Soraya and Ellen with heavily sexual overtones.

The intercutting between the two women, one voicing what the other is reading, unites them, creating a charged homoerotic bond - although they are not in the same physical space. A lovely musical/ score that mixes Eastern and Western motifs symbolizes the coming together of the two women from different cultures. In the next scene, with knowing smiles, as though they have just shared a secret, they prepare a meal together for the first time and, like a couple, tend to various household chores and repairs. The lesbian eroticism is unmistakable but subtle.<sup>44</sup>

The film utilises this stylistic device on one more occasion later in the film for a similar purpose, when it crosscuts between shots of Ellen burning some of the letters she wrote to Tom, and Soraya leaping over several small bonfires she has built, to mark the beginning of the Iranian New Year (Norouz). As the film cuts back and forth between both sets of flames, and Ellen begins to relinquish her past, so does Soraya learn to embrace her own. In this sense the blend of Eastern and Western music on the soundtrack also symbolises Soraya's acceptance of her own

hybrid identity as an Iranian-American. Indeed, Soraya's relationship with Ellen is mutually beneficial, significantly helping Soraya to open up and reconnect with Iranian culture. Soraya's behaviour in her regular discussion groups early on in the film for instance, reveals the extent of her unwillingness or inability to acknowledge the 'root' causes of her own cultural, economic and social marginalisation. She sneers and expresses indifference – sometimes comically, sometimes insensitively – as the various other members of the group speak – sometimes insufferably, sometimes poignantly – of their own emotional and psychological hang-ups, and refuses to discuss her own problems. When Ellen shows Soraya some photos however, of her own brief trip to Iran from years ago, and similarly when Alex asks Soraya to explain to him the intricacies of the ritual of Norouz, it acts as a kind of catalyst for Soraya to reflect upon her own past and her relationship with her family. A lengthy sequence towards the end of the film shows Soraya reconciling with her cousin Mitra and celebrating Norouz with her family and friends, leaving behind the ghost of her dead uncle that haunts and guides her throughout the film.

The following exchange between Soraya and Ellen during the dramatic climax of the film, in which Soraya helps Ellen to overcome her fears and step outside the house for the first time, to fool Tom into believing that Ellen does in fact not suffer from agoraphobia, furthermore underlines the crucial role that both women have played in each other's cultural and psychological reawakening:

- |        |   |  |
|--------|---|--|
| Soraya | – | Ellen, you can do this. You know, I was beginning to think that deep down we were a lot alike, but there's a big difference. I've been denying my past, where I come from and who I am, and you can't let go of yours. Now if you and I are going to go through with this we have to be bigger people than we have been. |
| Ellen  | – | What if I panic?   |
| Soraya | – | Then just hold on a little bit tighter.  |

In the film's penultimate close-up shot of Ellen speaking to an anonymous offscreen confidant – presumably a psychiatrist, but almost as if she were directly addressing the viewer – we learn of the tentative progress she has made since the events we have just witnessed, as well

as of Soraya's successful return to college. In a manner that is reminiscent of, yet decidedly more convincing and optimistic than both *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* and *Nightsongs* respectively therefore, *Walls of Sand* interweaves its tale of cultural, physical and psychological alienation with a strong feminist discourse. Considered in relation to *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore*, both films clearly acknowledge the impossibility and undesirability of a utopian return to an originary state of cultural stability or purity, and point toward the need for a malleable, open-ended concept of individual identity, that is nonetheless grounded in an awareness of one's own specific cultural background and family history.

Both films considered in this section therefore signal a clear shift away from the differentiated, yet overwhelmingly consistent view of the consequences of displacement found in earlier examples of exilic Iranian filmmaking such as *The Mission*, *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* and *Nightsongs*. At the same time, the newfound optimism and sense of freedom found in *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* and *Walls of Sand* is tempered by a knowledge of the pains of cultural assimilation, and the acceptance of the innate hybridity of one's personal identity. The overall outlook of both films however, cannot accurately be described as inherently diasporic in nature. Although the intensely autobiographical and deeply personal nature of both films does certainly not close off avenues of comparison with other émigré perspectives as such, it equally does not permit any other histories or different versions of the 'émigré experience' to find their way into these films. Which is not to suggest that either Jordan/Etessam and Zahedi are under any responsibility or obligation (moral or otherwise) to attempt to incorporate such alternative views into their films, or indeed that any of the films examined in the following sections of this chapter are any less personal than the films considered thus far. Rather it is to argue that *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* and *Walls of Sand* represent a decisive moment of transition in the historical development of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking, in a sense paving the way for and foreshadowing the emergence of a more complete, though still underdeveloped, (pan-)diasporic sensibility. It is also to contend, as this chapter now goes on to illustrate, that the more recent

examples of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking reveal a far greater awareness of how their own tales of dislocation fit into a wider global context of cultural displacement and diasporic formation.

### **The European Connection: Reza Parsa and Susan Taslimi**

If the analysis of the films in the two sections above bears more than a passing resemblance to Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's delineation of the five stages of mourning (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance, though maybe not quite in that order), it is because the films themselves, without wishing to impose too strict or linear a trajectory upon them, clearly invite such an attenuated reading. In spite of the continued, equivocal emphasis on the vicissitudes of displacement in many of the films considered below, these works do not represent a return of the repressed, so much as they do a recognition that, to quote Stuart Hall, "identity is always an open, complex, unfinished game – always under construction...It produces new subjects who bear the traces of the specific discourses which not only formed them but enable them to *produce themselves anew and differently*."<sup>45</sup>

Both Reza Parsa and Susan Taslimi live and make films in Sweden. Parsa was born in Tehran, and emigrated with his family to Sweden in 1980 at the age of twelve following the revolution. He later studied directing at the National Film School of Denmark. Taslimi was born in the city of Rasht in northern Iran, and is one of the country's most well-known actresses, noted for her portrayal of strong female characters, particularly in a number of films directed by Bahram Beyza'i, most famously her performance as Nai in *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (fig. 58). Along with other figures of the Iranian New Wave such as Parviz Sayyad, Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless, Taslimi represents a powerful physical and symbolic link between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora. She emigrated to Sweden in 1988. The connection between these two figures, other than the fact that they were both born in Iran and currently live Sweden, is the short film *Gränsen/Never* (1995, Sweden, and also significantly





Figure 58



Figure 59

translated sometimes as *Border*). Directed by Parsa, and made around the same time as *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* and *Walls of Sand* in the US, *Never* stars Taslimi as Aisha (fig. 59), an illegal immigrant of Arab descent who takes a schoolteacher (Claes Ljungmark) and two of his pupils hostage, and threatens to kill them unless the Swedish authorities grant her daughter Maryam (Nasim Kodadadi) asylum.

Throughout the film it is never revealed which country Aisha comes from. As Parsa explained in an interview with me, Taslimi was required to learn some basic Arabic for the role, rather than speak Farsi, which would have clearly identified Aisha as Iranian. This deliberate cultural non-specificity is characteristic of Parsa's subsequent films, and illustrates the development of a pan-diasporic-cum-Middle Eastern sensibility in exilic Iranian filmmaking. His first feature-length film, *Före Stormen/Before the Storm* (2000, Sweden), tells the story of Ali (Per Graffman), a Muslim émigré living in Sweden, whose idyllic family life is disrupted when he is contacted by members of the terrorist organisation he used to belong to in his unnamed country of origin (Stephen Holden in his New York Times review of the film suggests that Ali hails from the Balkans.)<sup>46</sup>

Likewise, the suicide bomber (Cesar Saracho) who confronts the viewer in Parsa's more recent short film *Meeting Evil* (2002, Sweden) never mentions the name of the country he lives in, the terrorist group to which he belongs, nor the name of the political party whose rally he is



targeting. It is only apparent that the film is set in an Islamic country from the Arabic Saracho's character speaks at the film's beginning, and from the brief glimpses of chador-clad women through the windows of the car as they pass by. With *Meeting Evil* at least, which as Parsa explained further was a direct response to the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, this cultural anonymity was intended to give the film a universal dimension, which according to Stephen Holden, in the case of *Before the Storm* makes the film seem "grandiose and forced."<sup>47</sup> What Holden's critique somewhat overlooks however is the degree to which Parsa refuses to pass any kind moral judgement on his protagonists. His films attempt to encompass the viewpoints of all his characters, showing the consequences of all their actions, whether they are innocent bystanders or terrorists, encouraging the viewer to make up their own mind.

In *Never* for instance, the potential sympathy for Aisha's plight is counterbalanced to a large degree by the opinions voiced firstly by the schoolteacher, who rightly insists that he and the schoolchildren have nothing to do with Aisha's predicament, and more significantly by Eriksson, the main police officer on the scene (Sten Ljunggren), who angrily condemns Aisha for involving her own daughter in such a violent and dangerous situation. Indeed if the viewer has complete sympathy for any character in the film it is for Maryam herself, who falls devastatingly silent upon hearing her mother shoot herself behind the locked classroom door, when she realises that the Swedish authorities will never accept her demands. Similarly, *Before the Storm*, by virtue of its greater length, represents a more wide-ranging and ambitious attempt by Parsa to display once again the even-handedness and impartiality he demonstrated in *Never*.

Somewhat similar to the plight of Daoud in *The Mission*, Ali is blackmailed into attempting to assassinate the Swedish politician Sanders (Claes Ljungmark once again), who is responsible for permitting the construction and shipment of two thousand military trucks to the regime in Ali's homeland. The courier for the terrorist organisation (Nasrin Pakkho) that contacts Ali, informs him that if does not undertake the assignment they will execute his former wife and son, whom Ali believed to be dead. The film nevertheless is far from aligning the viewer's sympathy solely with

Ali. The courier is accompanied throughout the film by her grandson Josef (fig. 60), who as she explains to Ali was blinded by a rocket from a military truck, built in Sweden. When Ali decides to accept the assignment, and infiltrates the hospital where Sanders is visiting his sick father, he discovers Sanders not to be a selfish, uncaring politician, but a son genuinely worried for his father's health. However, when Ali spares Sanders' life, in a subsequent sequence the viewer is shown Sanders (now wearing a neck brace after Ali's attempt to strangle him) signing the documents legalising the shipment of the aforementioned trucks to Ali's homeland (figs 61 and 62). The sequence continues to show quite graphically Ali's former wife and son being killed, not by the terrorists who held them hostage, but by missiles from the very trucks whose consignment they were seeking to halt (figs 63-65). The incorporation of so many contrasting perspectives and

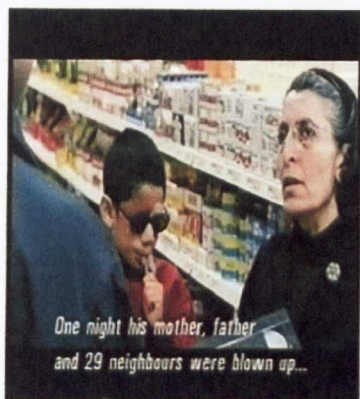


Figure 60

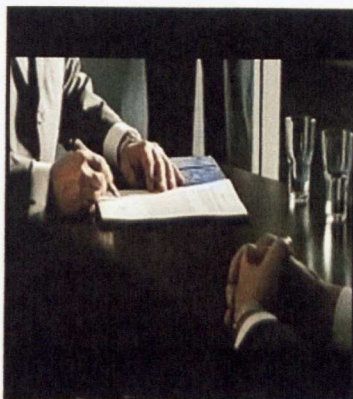


Figure 61



Figure 62



Figure 63



Figure 64



Figure 65

scenarios into the film, far from legitimising or condemning the actions of either Ali, the courier, the terrorists or Sanders, serves rather to present the viewer with a kaleidoscope of viewpoints and consequences, none of which can be totally accepted or dismissed with any degree of moral authority. This strategy is employed most audaciously in *Meeting Evil*.

The film itself is comprised almost entirely of what seems to be one single take of around ten minutes in length, in which the nameless suicide bomber directly addresses the camera in medium close-up from the back seat of his car, offering his reasons for the action he is about to take (figs 66 and 67). The bomber does not directly address the viewer however, but is rather recording his own video message, initially to his wife, who he then instructs to show the remainder of the tape to their daughter Nora some ten years later. The back of Nora's head is shown on those few occasions when the camera subtly, yet significantly, breaks away from the frontal medium close-up of the bomber delivering his monologue to the camera, to what is essentially an over-the-shoulder shot from Nora's perspective as she watches her father on television (fig. 68). At these points the viewer, although they cannot see Nora's face, is to an extent able to gauge her reaction to what her father is saying, by the slight undulation for instance that appears on the side of her throat when she swallows, and by the way in which she holds her hand to her head (in horror? In grief? In disgust? (see fig. 69). On one other important occasion



Figure 66



Figure 67





Figure 68



Figure 69

however, the camera breaks away from the medium close-up of the bomber, not to an over-the-shoulder viewpoint from Nora's perspective, but rather to a close-up of the television screen, situating itself in an area that significantly lies *in-between* Nora and her father (fig. 70); significant because at this point in time Nora's father utters



Figure 70

the following words: "They say I kill innocent people Nora, but there are no innocent people. There are only two options: with us or against us." Aligned completely with neither Nora nor her father at this point, neither here nor there, the indeterminate and morally neutral position of the camera quite subtly undermines the deterministic and brutally reductive binary logic invoked by the bomber. Rather than inviting the viewer to make up their own mind at this point however, or invoking a sense of moral ambiguity, the cut represents a very clear moral decision on the part of the film's director himself, as Parsa distances the audience from the bomber at this vital moment.

The unsympathetic image of the bomber that emerges at this point is complicated however by the emotion he displays throughout the rest of the film, as he bids farewell to his daughter and remembers some of the acts of violence he witnessed that drove him to become a terrorist in the first place. More importantly, the bomber's earlier remarks are offset by the final piece of advice he offers to his daughter: "The worst thing you can do to your enemy is to think by

yourself. Don't be stupid. People try to fool you. Always think by yourself. Don't be stupid. So, even what you've heard on this tape, you have to think for yourself." Delivered once again in medium close-up, this supplication to open-mindedness and self-determination is not only a direct appeal to Nora, but also to the viewer. It is also reflective of the carefully balanced perspective that all of Parsa's films strive to present, which when viewed in relation to the cultural anonymity of his central characters and the distinctly pan-diasporic sensibility of his films, represents a significant turning point in the evolution of Iranian émigré filmmaking.

Susan Taslimi's directorial debut by contrast is quite a different affair altogether. *Hus / Helvete/All Hell Let Loose* (2002, Sweden) deals with a quite specifically Iranian experience of displacement, examining the effect upon the lives of Serbandi (Hassan Brijany) and his family when his daughter Minoo (Melinda Kinnaman) returns home to Sweden from the US, where unbeknownst to her family she worked as a stripper. It also strongly implied via the seemingly involuntary flashbacks that punctuate the narrative that Minoo was involved in some form of prostitution or pornography. Upon Minoo's return the viewer also learns that Serbandi originally disowned her for getting pregnant by her ex-boyfriend Pontus (Ola Noreil). The film thus focuses mainly on the conflict between Serbandi and Minoo, and Serbandi's efforts to retain control over his entire family.

Despite the film's renewed emphasis however on the exigencies of displacement for a group of Iranian émigrés, it portrays the effects of cultural dislocation in a predominantly comical light. It thus provides an interesting counterpoint to the fatalistic outlook of the earlier Iranian émigré films considered above. *All Hell Let Loose* also examines in much greater detail than any of the films analysed so far, the generational conflicts brought about by the experience of displacement. Minoo for example lives not only with her parents, but also with her grandmother Farmour (Bibbi Azizi), Serbandi's mother. The film thus explores not only the tensions between father and daughter, between parents and their children, but also the fraught relationships between Farmour and the other members of Serbandi's household, his wife Nana (Caroline Rauf)

in particular. In contrast to the films considered above moreover, *All Hell Let Loose* apparently takes great glee in depicting the erosion of the traditional patriarchal structure of the Iranian family, as well as the inadequacy of certain conventional notions of Iranian masculinity, when they are transposed into a foreign context or culture. Serbandi for instance tries to pair Minoo off with his much older friend, the wheelchair-bound war veteran Karim (Kemal Görgö), who despite losing both of his legs in the Iran-Iraq War, is considered by Serbandi to be a real "man". Serbandi's understanding of masculinity is based therefore not so much upon a concept of physical wholeness or strength, but upon traditional Shii notions of male bravery and sacrifice (in other words, martyrdom).<sup>48</sup> His inability to comprehend the existence or recognise the validity of other masculinities is evidenced by the extreme distaste he exhibits upon encountering Minoo's friend, the effeminate hairdresser Bijan (Sunil Munshi), for the first time in the film.

Serbandi's patriarchal authority is called into question however during an early scene in the film, when he is shown trying frantically to prepare a food delivery for the home catering service he runs. As he rushes about the kitchen, his mother chastises him on more than one occasion for not being a real man, for doing "women's work", hitting him as if he were a child. Indeed the insubordination, not only of Minoo, who eventually reconciles with Pontus, much to Serbandi's disapproval, but of all the female family members, illustrates both dramatically and comically Serbandi's gradual emasculation. Minoo's sister Gita (Meliz Karlge) meets with her fiancé (Dennis Önder) for sexual liaisons behind Serbandi's back, while his wife Nana flirts constantly with Leif, the mechanic who comes round to fix her sewing machine regularly, at one point directly *in front of* Serbandi. Serbandi is furthermore contrasted physically with Leif. Short, overweight, with his swarthy complexion and balding head, Hassan Brijany literally stands in stark contrast with the tall, slim and Aryan-like Bjorn Söderback, the actor who portrays Leif (fig. 71).





Figure 71

Serbandi's failure to keep control over his family eventually erupts in violence however, when he discovers that Minoo has reunited with Pontus. Restrained from attacking her only after Nana puts a pair of scissors to his throat, he locks Minoo in her room on the day of Gita's wedding, only for Minoo to escape and humiliate Serbandi in front of the wedding guests by performing a strip tease in front of them on stage. The act of defiance and sisterly allegiance performed by Gita, who runs up on stage and cloaks Minoo's partly naked body with her wedding dress (fig. 72), rings somewhat false however in light of the previous ease with which she and Nana submitted to Serbandi's decision to lock Minoo in her bedroom. It is in its depiction of the touching relationship between Minoo and Farmour however, that *All Hell Let Loose* makes its most poignant statement regarding the potential for resistance to male tyranny through strong female bonds, and the possibility for reconciliation between different generations. Although they cannot understand each other – Farmour speaks only Farsi, while Minoo only speaks both Swedish and English – the affection shown between the two, and the joy Farmour expresses when Minoo arrives home – singing her to sleep, and playing with her in bed – illustrates the potential for understanding between the two generations, despite their separation by language. Indeed from the very beginning of the



Figure 72



film, Farmour is heavily associated with an 'authentic' sense of Iranian culture and heritage, that acts as a form of comfort to Minoo during her conflict with Serbandi. The opening shot of the film (fig. 73) shows Farmour through an elaborately embroidered curtain as she reminisces of how she used to sing lullabies to Minoo when she was a child, anticipating her granddaughter's impending arrival. The languorous, mystical Eastern melody on the soundtrack, in conjunction



**Figure 73**

with the slow billowing of cigarette smoke from her lips, as well as the languid camera movement, serve to introduce Farmour as an apparently more spiritual person than the other members of her family, who is more in touch with her Iranian roots. It is significant moreover that in the film's closing shot (fig. 74) of

the entire family – minus Serbandi – gathered

around the wedding table after all the other guests have left, it is Farmour who beckons her son Serbandi to join them. From offscreen, Serbandi replies: "I'm coming", an indication perhaps that he will eventually come to accept his diminished authority as family patriarch, and will attempt to etch out a new role for himself within the family unit. Farmour therefore also acts at the film's conclusion as a potential bridge *between* generations, hinting at the possibility of a reconciliation between Serbandi and the rest of his family in due time.



**Figure 74**

The films of Reza Parsa and Susan Taslimi therefore, seem to be very much representative of a growing awareness on the part of Iranian filmmakers working in exile and diaspora (or amongst those filmmakers working in Sweden at least) of the inherent irreducibility of the Iranian émigré experience. Parsa's films, by way of the cultural anonymity of their protagonists, the deliberate non-particularity of their narratives, and their considered moral objectivity, are informed by a manifestly pan-diasporic sensibility that emphasises the similarities between the respective experiences of displacement for all Middle Eastern émigrés, at the same time as it confounds monolithic understandings of these experiences. *All Hell Let Loose* by contrast explores the variability of factors, such as age and gender, which differentiate the experience of displacement *within* distinct diasporic formations. Or as Avtar Brah might put it, both films focus on the "*configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another.*" Both films certainly seem to be informed by an understanding of relationality similar to that outlined by Brah earlier in this chapter.

As if to bear out this interpretation of the noticeable shift in exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, the two films considered in the following section – *Maryam* (Ramin Serry, 2000, USA) and *America So Beautiful*, directed by Babak Shokrian – reveal a further dimension to the evolution of Iranian émigré filmmaking, one that is heavily and explicitly informed by an intricate knowledge of the history, reception and formation of the Iranian diaspora in the United States.

### **Children of the Revolution: *Maryam* & *America So Beautiful***

The emergence of both *Maryam* and *America So Beautiful* within such a short space of time of each other, in the years 2000 and 2001 respectively, is significant given each film's virtually identical subject matter. Although the events of the first film take place in New Jersey and the latter in Los Angeles, both are set during the outbreak of the Iranian Revolution in 1978-9, and focus on the hostility and racism encountered by a group of Iranian-American émigrés as a result of the ensuing US hostage crisis. The extent to which both films parallel each other is borne

out by a comparison of their remarkably similar opening credits sequences, which both utilise a montage of documentary and news footage to chronicle the downfall of the Shah and Khomeini's subsequent return from exile. Figures 75 and 79 respectively, show the famous footage of US President Jimmy Carter toasting with the Shah in December 1977, during Carter's tour of the Middle East, a few weeks prior to the beginning of the protests that would eventually culminate in the Shah's flight into exile. Figures 76 and 80 both show Ayatollah Khomeini descending the steps of the Air France plane which brought him back to Iran after years living in exile, on January 31<sup>st</sup> 1979. Both sequences then take a slightly different route, *Maryam's* opening credits showing the kinds of images that would come to be repeated endlessly on US television, of excited Iranian mobs crowding the streets of Tehran. In *Maryam's* case, establishing this imagery in the viewer's mind early on in the film is crucial in laying the groundwork for the parallel the film eventually draws between the Iranian people's reaction to the Revolution, and American public reaction to (*Maryam*)



Figure 75



Figure 76



Figure 77



Figure 78



(*America So Beautiful*)

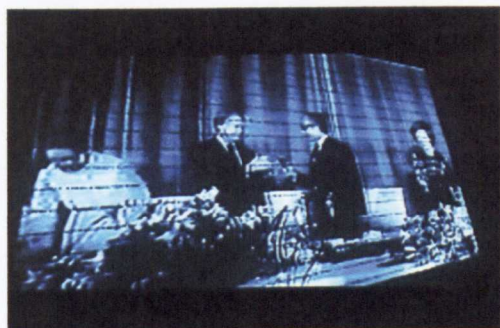


Figure 79



Figure 80



Figure 81

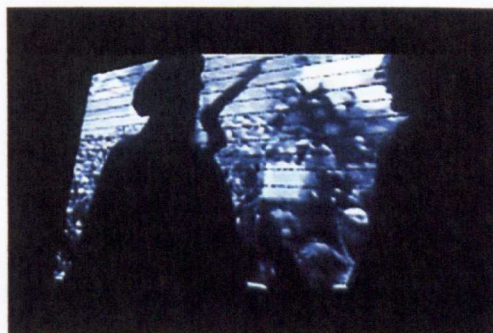


Figure 82

the subsequent hostage crisis. *America So Beautiful* by contrast uses actual footage of Americans being taken hostage as Iranians overran the US Embassy in Tehran in November 1979, nearly one full year after Khomeini's return to Iran. Both sequences nevertheless eventually conclude with a shot of Khomeini himself, though both shots are visibly different in how they portray the man. In *Maryam* for instance, the closing shot of Khomeini shows him reaching out affectionately to a young child, while in *America So Beautiful* the final image of Khomeini, his silhouette framed against a crowd of Iranians in the background, gun in hand, is far more mysterious and sinister in tone. These contrasting images of Khomeini, the former thoroughly paternalistic in nature, and the latter militant, are reflective of the different visions of the man in both Iranian and US society.

Both films also use music to further contextualise their stories. *Maryam's* opening credits for instance are accompanied – with an intentionally caustic irony no doubt – by The Cars 1979

song 'Let the Good Times Roll', while *America So Beautiful* employs a wide-ranging disco soundtrack throughout. The latter film follows the exploits of Houshang (played by Iranian-American pop star Mansour), who works part-time in the grocery market of his uncle Hamid (Alan De Satti), and longs to get rich and live the American Dream. He steals money from his uncle to give to local disco owner Sahmi (Houshang Touzie), who promises to make Houshang a partner in his lucrative disco business. Sahmi however uses the money to fund covertly what appears to be a counter-revolutionary terrorist group inside Iran. By the film's conclusion however, Sahmi is executed by members of the same group, apparently for keeping the money for himself and misleading them as to the size of the army he supposedly had at his disposal. Houshang's ambitions of improving his social and economic standing in US society are likewise destroyed.

In *America So Beautiful*, the attempt to strongly contextualise its story of displacement and cultural alienation extends quite clearly to the film's visual style. As Johnny Ray Huston observes in his *San Francisco Bay Guardian* review of the film, its tale of family conflict, primarily between Houshang and his uncle Hamid, reveals a "comic seriousness worthy of early Scorsese".<sup>49</sup> The film's immaculate cinematography in particular only serves to bring to light more clearly the seedy and garish neon-lit streets of Los Angeles, in a manner reminiscent of Martin Scorsese's hellish vision of New York City in *Mean Streets* (1973, USA) and *Taxi Driver* (1976, USA, see figs 83 and 84), while the images of Houshang and Sahmi dressing in front of their



Figure 83



Figure 84





Figure 85



Figure 86

mirrors early on in the film (figs 85 and 86), preparing to go out to Sahmi's disco, accompanied by Thelma Houston's 'Don't Leave Me This Way' on the film's soundtrack, are deliberately evocative of the John Travolta character Tony Manero in *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977, USA).

Indeed the spectre of Tony Manero looms largely over all the characters throughout the film, as they are advised on more than one occasion to conceal their Iranian ethnicity and pretend they are Italian-Americans, to avoid discrimination and to gain entry to the various discos scattered about Los Angeles. Such cultural mutability however, does not provide the characters with a newfound sense of freedom or fluidity, but only serves to increase their alienation from US society, and from their own culture. In one scene for instance, Houshang's friend Parviz (Fariborz David Diaan), the long-suffering taxi driver who puts up most of the money for Houshang's 'investment', berates a fellow Iranian in Hamid's store for changing his original name Dariush (the name of the famous ruler of the Persian Empire) to 'Disco Danny'. Unlike the film's other characters, Parviz dreams of returning to Iran to be with his family, predicting that the chaos following the revolution will be over within "one or two weeks". The film therefore is also careful to delineate the differing responses to the Iranian Revolution by the Iranian-American community living in the US at the time.

In *Maryam* by contrast, despite the film's careful attention to period detail, such as the yellow ribbons American families tie around the trees outside their houses in support of the US hostages, there is an unnervingly contemporary feel to the film's design and mise-en-scène,

which lend it a very topical edge. It was almost certainly this topical edge, in light of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, and the ensuing xenophobia experienced by Iranian and Arab-Americans living in the US, which led Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun Times* to champion the film so strongly in 2002, despite viewing the film for the first time at the 2000 Hawaii Film Festival, and to remark that *Maryam* "is more timely now than ever."<sup>50</sup> The film itself examines the impact upon the lives of an Iranian-American family, primarily the young teenage daughter of the family Maryam (Mariam Parris), when their devout Muslim relative Ali (David Eckert), Maryam's cousin, comes from Iran to live with them. Ali is staunchly in favour of the revolution taking place in his homeland, and unlike Daoud in *The Mission*, is largely repelled by US society. The culture clash between Ali and his US relatives is initially played for comic effect (such as when Ali mocks Maryam for thinking that he does not know what pizza is), as is Ali's aversion to US society (he is forced begrudgingly to accompany Maryam to a roller disco, where he is offered drugs). This aversion is exacerbated however when the Shah arrives in New York for medical treatment. Outraged, Ali resolves to attempt to assassinate the Shah, and is eventually forced to return to Iran after his failed attempt to do so.

The most striking aspect of *Maryam*, as noted above, is the way in which it draws an explicit comparison between the Iranian people's response to the Revolution and the subsequent taking of US hostages on the one hand, and the response of the American public on the other hand. The footage of the frenzied mobs of Iranians swarming the streets of Tehran which open the film, representative as they are of the image of Iran that was being circulated in the US media at the time, are extremely recollective of Hamid Naficy's comments upon the media portrayal of Iran following the Revolution in the opening chapter of this thesis. These images are then paralleled later in the film by the even more violent and incendiary images of hysterical and angry Americans beating peaceful Iranian-American protestors, burning the Iranian flag, and chanting 'Bomb Iran!' (see figs 87-90 below). Through the indirect juxtaposition of these images, *Maryam*





Figure 87

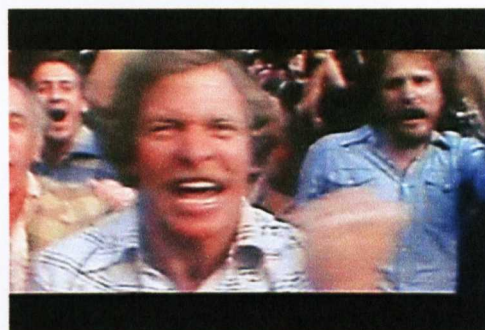


Figure 88



Figure 89



Figure 90

highlights the similar types of patriotic fundamentalism and reactionary hatred taking hold of both countries. This comparison is supported by the subsequent racist abuse encountered by both Maryam and Ali at school. In one particularly uncomfortable scene for example, Maryam's classmates imply she has facial hair, which they say: "Must be a problem for you people."

Despite the similarities between *America So Beautiful* and *Maryam* however, in terms of how they both strive to contextualise their respective narratives of cultural alienation and dislocation, the films differ markedly in the conclusions they reach concerning the fate of their characters, as well as in their particular outlooks on cultural displacement. The final scene of the latter film for instance, shows Maryam and Ali bidding farewell at the airport (how his relatives manage to smuggle Ali out the US with the police after him is conveniently overlooked). The scene, despite the emotive score that accompanies it, contains an understated and implicit acknowledgement on the part of both characters – apparent in the kind yet sombre glances they exchange – of their innate difference from each other, despite their shared Iranian heritage. As Ali

departs and Maryam remains in the US, the film concludes by in fact stressing the separateness and irreconcilability between Maryam and her cousin, pointing to a level of understanding beyond essentialist notions of 'ethnicity'.

The final scene of *America So Beautiful* by contrast, reaches out beyond the fate of Houshang himself, to lend the film a multicultural and vividly pan-diasporic dimension, in a manner that is reminiscent of yet different from the pan-Middle Eastern sensibility of Reza Parsa's films. After his dealings with Sahmi fall through, Houshang, like Parviz, resorts to driving a taxi. The film's closing images, significantly intercut with footage of Ronald Reagan's presidential inauguration and the safe return of the US hostages, show Houshang and a number of his fellow taxi drivers, from a variety of racial backgrounds, all loitering about the same taxi rank. The montage sequence effectively depicts the social and economic marginalisation of ethnic minorities in the US in general (figs. 91-95). Although as Shokrian, the cast members and various reviews of the film have pointed out, the conclusion is also hopeful insofar as it represents Houshang's second chance at the American Dream, even if this dream is symbolised somewhat irreverently by the tacky figurine of the Statue of Liberty Houshang stands on his dashboard (fig. 96). Indeed as Michelle Langford notes, the "ragged Uncle Sam"<sup>51</sup> figure that pops up at various stages throughout the film (figs 97 and 98), serves to remind the audience (if not alas, Houshang himself) of the superficiality of the American Dream he is chasing so desperately.



Figure 91



Figure 92





Figure 93



Figure 94



Figure 95

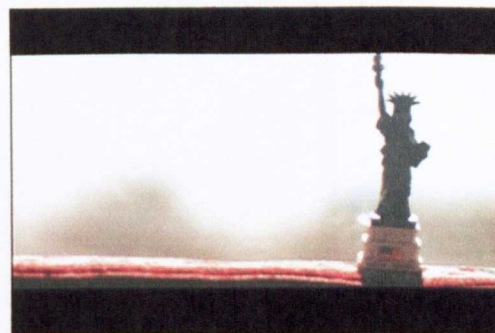


Figure 96



Figure 97



Figure 98

With their similarly retrospective portrayals of the vicissitudes of life in diaspora for a group of Iranian-American émigrés living in the US, both *Maryam* and *America So Beautiful* nevertheless seem to indicate that exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmakers have begun to acquire a sense of perspective. Indeed, both Ramin Serry and Babak Shokrami have spoken in detail of how their own experiences of living in the US during the revolutionary period influenced their respective films.<sup>52</sup> As Serry explains:

For many years, I was ashamed of being Iranian, so it didn't occur to me to write a script about Iranians. But my second short was about a Persian ... a friend of mine told me I should write about being Iranian, so the second short film was about a Persian wedding. It was having made that film and having it be a positive experience that inspired me to further explore the subject. So, in about 1995, I decided to write about being Iranian, and the most important and interesting thing about being Iranian, I felt, was my experience during the hostage crisis. It was around that time, 1995, that I first had the idea and then I wrote the script over the course of three years, and finally shot the film in 1998. ... I now feel a sense of relief in releasing this film and letting the public know what Iranians went through, because it's like a big confessional and therapeutic...<sup>53</sup>

Shokrian has made extremely similar remarks, echoing not only Serry but also Caveh

Zahedi:

The characters and customs within my own culture have always fascinated me. It made sense to make films about "us". I feel deeply compelled to embrace the generation before me, my own generation and the generation after me, to try and understand it, come to terms with it and to capture its essence. It is difficult to explain but it really comes out of love and the need to show this to ourselves and the rest of the world.<sup>54</sup>

The diasporic sensibility that was notably absent from the earlier examples of Iranian émigré filmmaking considered in this chapter therefore, seems to have in a sense come to fruition in *Maryam* and *America So Beautiful*. Although the former film concludes by emphasising the differences between cultures, and the latter film the similarities, both clearly embody a more open-ended and flexible understanding of ethnicity, and of life in exile and diaspora, which effectively debilitates traditional conceptions of the émigré experience of displacement as undifferentiated and monolithic. The film with which we conclude this brief overview of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema however, *House of Sand and Fog*, undoubtedly the most visible and well-known, yet in certain respects most ambiguous example of Iranian émigré filmmaking, in many ways signals a retreat from the diasporic sensibility manifested by the films considered above.

### **Recurring Visions: *House of Sand and Fog***

Adapted from the American novel of the same name, directed by a Ukrainian émigré, and starring a British actor in its leading male role, *House of Sand and Fog*, released in 2003, does not overtly present itself as the foremost example of an exilic or diasporic Iranian cinema. The film

however does depict the tragic consequences of displacement for an Iranian-American family living in Los Angeles, California, when its patriarch Massoud Amir Behrani (Ben Kingsley), a former Colonel under the Shah's dictatorship, purchases a house that is mistakenly repossessed from its former owner, an American woman named Kathy (Jennifer Connelly). The film also stars well-known Iranian émigré actress Sohré Aghdashloo (who also starred in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria*, considered above) as Behrani's wife. Aghdashloo is a notable star of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, appearing in *Suteh-Delan/Broken Hearts* (Ali Hatami, 1978, Iran), alongside Iran's most popular male movie star at the time, Behrouz Vossoughi, as well as the Abbas Kiarostami film *The Report*.

Moreover, because of its subject matter the film naturally attracted a great deal of attention from Iranian-American media outlets in the US. Many of these outlets eulogised over Kingsley's amazingly quick mastery of the Farsi language, even though he utters only two words of Farsi in the entire film, "*Fahmidi?*" ("You understand?") and "*Azizam*" ("My Dear"). More commonly however, discussions of the film focused on the character of Nadi, or more accurately, Sohré Aghdashloo herself. Indeed Aghdashloo was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her performance at the 2004 Academy Awards. In the same year, the prominent Iranian lawyer and human rights activist Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, in what many Iranian-American media sources were quick to dub the 'year of Iranian women'.

Asgdashloo's portrayal of Nadi however, and the eventual fate of the character within the film overall, is more reminiscent of the exclusionary and myopic outlook of displacement underpinning the earlier examples of Iranian émigré filmmaking considered above. Gone is the inclusive pan-diasporic sensibility that seems to inform films such as *America So Beautiful*, to be replaced by a decidedly restricted view of displacement, one that once again seemingly denies the possibility of parallel histories and alternative points of view, despite the even-handedness with which the film treats its central characters, Behrani and Kathy. Indeed, from the very beginning *House of Sand and Fog* seems to move away from a panoptic viewpoint that

encompasses and recognises the cultural and economic disenfranchisement of other ethnic minorities in the US. The opening images of the film for example show Behrani shovelling asphalt as a roadside worker, just one of the jobs he struggles to hold down in order to pay for his daughter's wedding, as well as the obscenely large and plush apartment that he and his family



Figure 99



Figure 100

live in. Behrani is shown quite clearly alongside workers from other ethnic minority groups in the US, at one point ruefully observing a fellow co-worker of Asian descent eating a makeshift meal after they have finished their shift (figs. 99 and 100). From this point onwards however, the film moves away from this culturally inclusive outlook to concentrate single-mindedly on the downfall of Behrani and his family. As the film progresses the power struggle between Behrani and Kathy, who wants to regain her house, becomes more tense and violent, resulting in the accidental killing of their son Esmail (Jonathan Ahdout) by a police officer. As a result of this tragedy, Behrani kills himself and his wife. The sequence depicting their deaths culminates in a somewhat contrived overhead shot of he and Nadi lying next to each other on their bed, as Kathy leans over them (fig. 101). Indeed the heavy-handedness and symmetry of this shot is symbolic of the film's fixed and narrow focus on the fate of Behrani and Nadi,



Figure 101



with the exception of its sympathetic portrayal of Kathy herself. It is reflective of the intransigent nature of the film's overall perspective, which with the exception of the opening sequence examined above, like the films considered earlier in this chapter seems to exclude the possibility of the existence of other experiences of cultural displacement and social marginalisation. Which is not to suggest, once again, that the film's director, Vadim Perelman, is under any responsibility to broaden the film's overall perspective in such a manner. Rather it is to point out, at the risk of proposing an overly teleological understanding of the development of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, that *House of Sand and Fog* represents somewhat of a step backwards for Iranian émigré filmmaking, given the overall shift outlined so far in this chapter, from a strictly exilic to a more flexible pan-diasporic outlook.

Indeed it is the similarity in fates between Pori, Aghdashloo's character in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria*, and Nadi, that most vividly illustrates the repetitive and deterministic nature of *House and Sand and Fog*. Although the circumstances surrounding the death of each character are radically different in each film, the similarity in composition between figures 102 and 105 below is much too striking to go unnoticed, and is in stark contrast to the other images of Aghdashloo which emerge from the films considered previously in this chapter (figs 102-105).

(*The Changing Faces of Soreh Aghdashloo*)



**Figure 102**  
Dead in *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* (1989)



**Figure 103**  
Happy housewife in *Maryam* (2000)



**Figure 104**  
Fictional exiled film actress in *America So Beautiful* (2001)



**Figure 105**  
Dead again in *House of Sand and Fog* (2003)

Nadi moreover, in comparison to many of the other female characters considered above, is an extremely unflattering and two-dimensional depiction of Iranian femininity. Even though the film itself is certainly a damning critique of Iranian as well as US masculinity, Nadi is a far cry from the more determined, independent and downright spunky female protagonists of more recent examples of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, such as Minoo from *All Hell Let Loose* and Maryam. Nadi by contrast is portrayed as completely subservient to her husband throughout the entire film, not even having a say in her death, as Behrani poisons her, without even informing her of their son's death. It is however worth noting that unlike her younger female counterparts, Nadi is a first-generation Iranian immigrant, and as such arguably more vulnerable, as James Clifford puts it, to "the claims of old and new patriarchies."<sup>55</sup> Yet the film makes little attempt to explore the generational differences that may figure into the experience of cultural displacement, sidelining Nadi and Behrani's daughter Soraya (Navi Rawat) for the majority of the film following her marriage. Although decidedly more polished than *Maryam* and *America So Beautiful* therefore, both of which also exhibit a strong realist aesthetic and conventional dramatic narrative, *House of Sand and Fog* displays a far less nuanced understanding of the Iranian émigré experience, precisely because of its relentlessly blinkered focus on the tragic fates of Behrani and Nadi.

### **Tracking post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema**

This chapter has attempted to outline the transformations in exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking across Europe and North America over the past twenty-five years, in order to sketch a broader and more panoramic view of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, which is typically understood as being singularly synonymous with the films of the New Iranian Cinema. Before attempting this it was necessary to outline the criteria of selection for the films considered above. This chapter has thus employed a broad definition of authorship, in order to include those films such as *Walls of Sand* and *House of Sand and Fog*, which although are not directed by Iranian émigrés, can still certainly be regarded as formative examples of an exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema, by virtue of the presence of Iranian émigrés working at other levels in the filmmaking process. It was also necessary before attempting this overview to examine some of the main developments that have been made in the field of exile and diaspora studies in recent years, and to engage with some of the key theoretical arguments put forward in Hamid Naficy's influential contribution to the study of exilic and diasporic filmmaking in general, *An Accented Cinema*.

After addressing these issues, this chapter then went on to demonstrate how Iranian émigré filmmaking is characterised largely by a gradual transition from an exclusively exilic to an inclusively diasporic, and in some instances pan-diasporic perspective. It is this evolution, discernible in the works of Iranian émigré filmmakers working throughout Europe and North America over the past twenty-five years, that makes it possible to conceive of this contradictory group of films as a larger, collective body of work, aside from, though not entirely independent of the fact that they are all made by Iranian émigrés, and regardless of the fact that they were all made outside of Iran.

During this evolution moreover, Iranian émigré filmmakers have consistently addressed issues of cultural identity and national belonging, in ways that directly call into question traditional methods of organising national cinemas along strict geographical boundaries. As observed above, the precise implications for the concept of national cinema will be discussed in greater

detail in the conclusion to this thesis. What this chapter has striven to accomplish however, is to present a more kaleidoscopic view of the sheer variety of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, in just a mere handful of its various manifestations. It has also intended to highlight the limitations of viewing the New Iranian Cinema in isolation from all the diverse forms of Iranian filmmaking across the world, in this chapter across Europe and North America in particular. Put quite simply, the New Iranian Cinema is by no means representative of the entire spectrum of Iranian filmmaking, inside and *outside* of Iran. A more nuanced comprehension of the fundamentally deterritorialised nature of much post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking contributes to a wider understanding of indigenous Iranian cinema itself, and vice versa.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis however, there are certain theoretical and practical problems with such a collective, comparative analysis as the one undertaken in this chapter, insofar as it risks glossing over some of the finer aspects of these filmmakers and their works. The final two chapters of this thesis therefore, focus in detail on some of the émigré works of Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless respectively, so as to provide a counterpoint to the undeniable methodological limitations of the approach adopted in this chapter, as well as exploring even further the links between the New Iranian Cinema and two of Iran's most influential and important filmmakers.

### **Postscript: Back to Iran**

*Iran is Home* (2003, USA/Iran) is a seventy-minute video diary directed by Fariborz David Diaan. It relates Diaan's return to Iran, over twenty years after he moved to the US for his education in 1976, and would no doubt make a fascinating comparison with Parviz Kimiavi's most recent film *Iran is My Land* (1999), made upon Kimiavi's return to Iran after a near twenty-year absence, spent making mostly television documentaries in France.<sup>56</sup>

The image of Iran that emerges from Diaan's film is, to use a cliché, that of a country of contrasts. Pictures of perennial Hollywood movie star Tom Cruise are displayed in shop windows



alongside pictures of Mohammed-Reza Shajarian, the most famous of classical Persian singers (fig. 106). Serene vistas of Iran's northern mountains (fig. 107) clash with images of Tehran's bustling traffic and street life (fig. 108), and advertisements for Playstation on the sides of buses (fig. 109) seem incongruous next to shots of turbaned mullahs roaming the streets (fig. 110). Indeed as well as capturing the mythical, picturesque side of Iran, Diaan's diary seems intended as much to capture the everyday and commercialised side of the country, or its capital city Tehran rather. For the film is punctuated with shots of product logos, fast food restaurants and Western-imported movies (figs to. 111-3), a side of Iran that runs contrary to stereotypes of the country and its people as somehow backward and/or hostile to foreign cultures, and confounds the belief that a theocratic society such as that of Iran's is somehow inherently incompatible with Western consumerism.



Figure 106



Figure 107



Figure 108



Figure 109



Figure 110



Figure 111



Figure 112

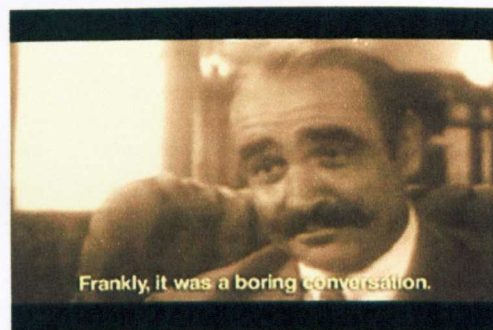


Figure 113

As well as being the well-known host of a television show aimed at Iranian expatriate groups in the US, as noted above Diaan plays the character of Parviz in *America So Beautiful*. As Babak Shokrian states in an interview also available with the DVD of the film: "I hope that the Iranians of America, and the Iranians of Iran one day, can share ideas, and make films together, and that the Iranians from Iran can see these films." Perhaps the most striking aspect of Diaan's film therefore is the way in which he employs the medium of film to carry messages from Iran back to expatriate Iranian communities living in the US. From the two young men he interviews in the Tehran bazaar who complain of the lack of jobs in the country (fig. 114), to the middle-aged man and woman who express their heartfelt good wishes to fellow Iranians in the US (figs 115 to 116), to the young woman who asks if all the stereotypes she has of the US are true (fig. 117), Diaan's diary allows the Iranians of Iran to communicate with their North American counterparts, if not exactly vice versa.





Figure 114



Figure 115

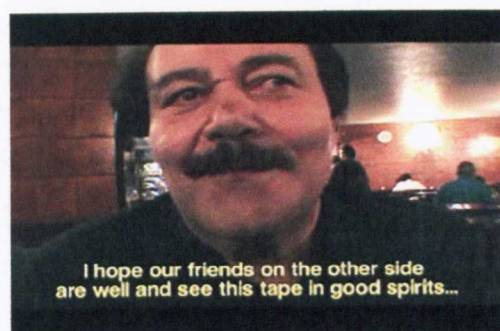


Figure 116



Figure 117

*Iran is My Home* therefore represents a significant moment in the history of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema. Wholly collaborative efforts between indigenous Iranians and Iranian émigrés remain for the foreseeable future a political, practical and geographical impossibility. *Iran is My Land* nevertheless symbolises the first, and perhaps only, tentative step towards the conceptualisation and the actual use of the medium of cinema as a means of forging links between the two groups, resulting in a film that reaches out to and addresses the concerns of Iranians living anywhere and everywhere in the world. With the screening of the film at the 2003 IFP/Los Angeles Film Festival, there is a sense in which exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema has finally begun to come full circle. With the following analyses of the émigré works of Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless respectively, I hope to bring this thesis in a sense full circle also.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 83-7.
- <sup>2</sup> Zohreh C. Sullivan, *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* (Philadelphia; England: Temple University Press, 2001), XVI.
- <sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Letters From Prison: Volume 1*, ed. Frank Rosengarten, trans. Raymond Rosenthal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 70.
- <sup>4</sup> Naficy, 152.
- <sup>5</sup> Robert Stam, "Beyond Third Cinema: The aesthetics of hybridity" in *Rethinking Third Cinema*, ed. Wimal Dissanayake and Anthony R. Gunaratne, 37-8 (Routledge: New York and London, 2003).
- <sup>6</sup> Naficy, 10.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid. 3-4.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid. 45.
- <sup>9</sup> See Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas, "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiences for the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World" in *New Latin American Cinema – Volume 1: Theory, Practices, and Transcontinental Articulations*, ed. Michael T. Martin, 33-58 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).
- <sup>10</sup> Naficy, 30-1.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid. 152.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid. 188.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid. 213.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. 221.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid. 12-5.
- <sup>16</sup> See Naficy, "Narrowcasting in Diaspora: *Iranian Television in Los Angeles*", in *Planet TV: A Global Television Reader*, ed. Lisa Parks and Kumar Shanti, 376-401 (New York: New York University Press, 2003).
- <sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), 178-82.
- <sup>18</sup> This is a distinction Michael T. Martin makes in his essay, "Framing the "Black" in Black Diasporic Cinemas", in *Cinemas of the Black Diaspora*, ed. Martin, 3 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995).
- <sup>19</sup> Zuzana M. Pick, "Chilean Cinema in Exile, 1973-1986", in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume Two – Studies of National Cinemas*, ed. Michael T. Martin, 431 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).
- <sup>20</sup> Laura U. Marks, "A Deleuzian Politics of Hybrid Cinema", *Screen* 35, no.3 (1994): 262.
- <sup>21</sup> Winifred Woodhull, "Exile", *Yale French Studies*, no.81 (1993): 8.
- <sup>22</sup> Elazar Barkan and Marie-Denise Shelton, *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas*, ed. Barkan and Shelton (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4. Also, as Edward Said remarks rather romantically, "'exile' carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality". See *Reflections on Exile*..., 181.
- <sup>23</sup> See William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return", *Diaspora* 1, no.1 (Spring 1991): 91, for the six criteria Safran sets out.
- <sup>24</sup> James Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no.3 (1994): 306-8.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid. 321.
- <sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation", *Cultural Studies* 7, no.3 (1993): 362.
- <sup>27</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 203.
- <sup>28</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 17.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid. 46.
- <sup>30</sup> Alastair Phillips, "An Accented Cinema", *Screen* 44, no.3, (2003): 344.
- <sup>31</sup> Homi K. Bhabha., *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 148-9.
- <sup>32</sup> Sheila Johnston, 'The Mission', *Monthly Film Bulletin* 51, no.604, (1984): 155.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>34</sup> The poems are a mixture of original compositions by Chinese-American writer Fae Myenne Ng, and entries from. They are recited not by Mabel Kwong, but by Lois Taylor.

- <sup>35</sup> Janet Wolff, "On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism", *Cultural Studies* 7, no.2 (1993): 230. "By 'intrinsic', though, I do not mean 'essential'; rather my interest is in the centrality of travel/mobility to *constructed* masculine identity".
- <sup>36</sup> Clifford, 314.
- <sup>37</sup> Keya Ganguly,, "Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood", *Cultural Studies* 6, no.1 (1992): 38.
- <sup>38</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia, 120 (London and New York: Arnold, 1996).
- <sup>39</sup> Michael Mordler, "Privacy Last", *Filmmaker* 2, no.3, (1994): 41.
- <sup>40</sup> Hamid-Reza Sadr, "An Exclusive Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless:...and the World Became His", *Film International* 5, no.3-4, (1998): 55.
- <sup>41</sup> Akram Zaatari, "Abbas Kiarostami", *Bomb: Place Unknown* 50 (1994-5), p.13. Naficy also mentions in *An Accented Cinema* (p.324) how Zahedi revealed to him in an interview that Kiarostami's films had affected him deeply.
- <sup>42</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 256.
- <sup>43</sup> Mordler, 58.
- <sup>44</sup> Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 210.
- <sup>45</sup> Hall, "Culture, Community, Nation", 362.
- <sup>46</sup> Stephen Holden, 'Before the Storm': Parallel Predicaments on a Collision Course', *New York Times*, March 30 2001, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F04E6DC143FF933A05750C0A9679C8B63>.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>48</sup> See Shahin Gherami, 'Mullahs, Martyrs, and Men: Conceptualizing Masculinity in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Men & Masculinities* 5, no.3, (January 2003): 257-74.
- <sup>49</sup> Johnny Ray Huston, "Long Story Short: Notes on the S.F. International Asian American Film Festival's 2002 programs", *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, June 12, 2002, [http://www.sfbg.com/36/23/art\\_notes.html](http://www.sfbg.com/36/23/art_notes.html).
- <sup>50</sup> Roger Ebert, 'Maryam', *Chicago Sun Times*, April 12, 2002, <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20020412/REVIEWS/204120305/1023>.
- <sup>51</sup> Michelle Langford, "Dreams, Disco and Politics: An Interview with Babak Shokrian", *Senses of Cinema*, March 2002, <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/20/shokrian.html>.
- <sup>52</sup> For interviews with Serry, see [www.filmbrats.com/interviews/serry.html](http://www.filmbrats.com/interviews/serry.html) and [www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/serry](http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/serry). For Shokrami, see <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/02/20/shokrian.html>.
- <sup>53</sup> Pam Grady, 'Maryam's Maker', <http://www.reel.com/reel.asp?node=features/interviews/serry>.
- <sup>54</sup> Langford.
- <sup>55</sup> Clifford, p.314.
- <sup>56</sup> Kimiavi is one of Iran's most influential pre-revolutionary filmmakers, director of *P mesle Pelican/P is for Pelican* (1972 , Iran), *The Mongols/Mongoha* (1973, Iran) and *Baq-e sangui/Gardens of Stone* (1976, Iran).

### **Chapter 3: Close Up 1 – Amir Naderi**

Having taken a step back so to speak in the preceding chapter, in order to better comprehend the diffuse and multifaceted nature of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, this chapter, as well as the next, aims by contrast to zoom in and focus upon the works of two of this cinema's most important yet overlooked filmmakers in Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless. The reasons for focusing specifically on the films of Naderi and Saless are twofold. First of all, despite the relative obscurity of their non-Iranian or émigré works, Naderi and Saless are arguably the two most prominent filmmakers to leave Iran during the revolutionary period (Saless in 1974, Naderi some ten years later in 1986), both playing influential roles in the formation of what would come to be commonly referred to as the New Iranian Cinema prior to their respective departures. Secondly, their films do not comfortably fit into the evolutionary pattern outlined for exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema in the previous chapter. Naderi and Saless's films represent divergences from this pattern, taking Iranian cinema even farther afield in new and interesting directions. Their films merit close individual analysis therefore, not only because they provide a counterpoint to the methodological approach of the previous chapter and highlight the limitations of an overly teleological understanding of the development of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking, but also because they promise to widen further our knowledge of the diversity of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

For instance, while the continuities between Saless's pre-exilic and post-exilic works are strongly apparent, and will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter, Naderi's New York films represent a clear stylistic break with his Iranian works. Perhaps most strikingly, gone is the predominantly restrained and minimalist camerawork of films such as *The Runner and Water*, *Wind and Dust*, to be replaced by an extremely mobile camera, seemingly unfettered in its ability to travel everywhere and film everything. It is in trying to ascertain however the extent to which this shift is indicative of, or these transformations attributable to Naderi's own experience of 'displacement', that many of the tensions surrounding concepts of exilic and diasporic filmmaking in general begin to emerge.

Naficy for example has argued convincingly that *Manhattan By Numbers* (1993, USA), Naderi's second US-based film after the Iranian-US co-production *Sakht-e Iran/Made in Iran* in 1978, focusing as it does on the desperate attempts of its male protagonist George Murphy (John Wodja) to raise enough money to pay his rent and avoid being made homeless, can certainly be viewed as "an allegory of the conditions of exile itself".<sup>1</sup> Male protagonists are notable by their absence however in Naderi's subsequent film *A, B, C...Manhattan* (1997, USA). Although the central female characters of this film are all 'lost' in one way or another, be it physically, emotionally or psychologically, it does not deal with a specifically cultural or even 'male' experience of displacement. Which is not to suggest that *A, B, C...Manhattan* completely defies an allegorical reading for Naderi's own particular 'experience of displacement' simply because the central characters of the film are American and/or female, especially when the film itself, on a textual level at least, can certainly be construed as embodying an exilic and/or diasporic filmmaking aesthetic, as well as manifesting a distinctly exilic and/or diasporic sensibility. Rather it is to argue that understanding such a complex film as *A, B, C...Manhattan* solely or primarily as an example of exilic and/or diasporic filmmaking, simply because it is directed by an Iranian émigré, impoverishes the film to a considerable degree, closing it off to other possible readings. In auteur-structuralist terms, it ascribes far too much importance to the director as a determining influence on the overall film, in a way that does not permit the film to 'speak for itself'. Any straightforward understanding of *A, B, C...Manhattan* for instance, as being a culturally non-specific metaphor for Naderi's own 'experience of displacement', is immediately complicated by the fact that the film's portrayal of displacement is explicitly *gendered*. Indeed in *A, B, C...Manhattan*, rather than depicting his own experiences as Iranian émigré living in New York vicariously through the respective plights of the film's three central female characters, Naderi seems far more concerned with exploring a quite different subject altogether; namely, the place or role of women in the city.

Such an argument however does risk understating the extent to which Naderi's own experiences as an Iranian émigré inevitably inflect upon his films. After the following analysis of *A, B, C...Manhattan* therefore, this chapter attempts a more balanced reading of Naderi's



subsequent film *Marathon* (2000, USA), the central character of which is once again female (although in this instance she is a decidedly *lone* female protagonist). Like its predecessor, *Marathon* is once again set in New York City, though on this occasion the film's focus extends beyond the confines of the Manhattan district. The film's portrayal of urban dislocation however, is far less contingent upon an understanding of the film's central protagonist as a woman, than is the case in *A, B, C...Manhattan*. As a result, unlike *A, B, C...Manhattan*, perhaps due to its altogether narrower focus on a day in the life of one central female character, it is certainly possible by the conclusion of *Marathon* to make specific inferences regarding the exact nature of Naderi's own personal attitude toward the city in which he now lives and works.

This chapter therefore attempts an analysis of two of Naderi's most recent New York films, an analysis that is certainly to an extent subject to, yet not overly dependent upon, an understanding of these films as the work of an Iranian émigré filmmaker. Such an analysis will serve not only to help us think outside of the potentially restrictive paradigm of exilic and diasporic cinema, but also extend even further our knowledge of the eclecticism and scope of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking.

### **A, B, C...Manhattan**

Born in the southern Iranian port city of Abadan, Amir Naderi is a wholly self-trained and self-educated filmmaker. In interviews he has spoken of how he learnt about filmmaking as he grew up, by watching Hollywood movies starring the likes of Fred Astaire and Charlie Chaplin, before eventually embarking upon his own filmmaking career.<sup>2</sup> His film *The Runner* was the first post-revolutionary Iranian film to garner international attention when it was discovered at Venice, and won the top prize at the 1985 Nantes Three Continents Festival. Perhaps more than Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?*, *The Runner* can be credited with kick-starting interest throughout Europe and North America in what would come to be known as the New Iranian Cinema. Naderi's subsequent film *Water, Wind and Dust* was banned by the Iranian government during the mid-80s, and was not released until after Naderi had already emigrated to the US. Some ten years after his emigration, Naderi made *A, B, C...Manhattan*, a film distinguished as

much by its tripartite depiction of femininity, as it is by its portrayal of Manhattan. Indeed the two are intimately connected with each other, the film examining and contrasting the different ways in which its three central female characters experience the urban metropolis of New York City.

Recent studies of representations of the city in cinema therefore, influenced heavily as they are by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, and more recently Edward Soja, are characterised by their distinct emphasis on what has been described as the supposed 'spatial turn' within the academic discipline of film studies itself.<sup>3</sup> Such studies often merely serve to reiterate, in a somewhat complex and abstract manner, the classic text/context binary opposition within film studies. They have nevertheless provided many insightful and thought-provoking analyses of how the city – in this case New York City in particular – has been represented in film. Soja for example insists on the need to rethink conventional, *historical* conceptions of the city or the 'urban experience' in 'spatial' terms, as heterogeneous, fragmentary and multi-sited rather than homogenous, continuous and monolithic. Similarly, many studies focus on how certain cinematic representations of the city, and of its traditionally marginalised inhabitants (be they non-white, gay, female, etc) explore the racial, sexual and gender differences and inequalities which challenge archetypal visions of the city as a site of 'white', 'male' and/or 'heterosexual' power or dominance. Elisabeth Mahoney's illuminating essay on *Just Another Girl on the I. R. T.* (Leslie Harris, 1992, USA)<sup>4</sup> is a good example of this kind of analysis. Indeed by means of a brief comparison between her examination of the film's opening credits sequence and the opening images of *A, B, C...Manhattan*, it is possible to illustrate how some of the stylistic and visual techniques employed in the latter film serve to undermine the female protagonists' sense of autonomy and self-control.

In her essay, Mahoney acknowledges the influential work of feminist philosophers, urban theorists and geographers such as Gillian Rose, Elizabeth Grosz and Doreen Massey, and their contributions to a better understanding of how women live in urban environments. Massey in particular, Mahoney explains, is especially critical of postmodern theorists such as Soja and David Harvey, whose work she argues – despite their respective definitions of the 'postmodern condition' as a site of eclecticism and conflict – merely continues to peripheralise and objectify the

marginalised subjects who already suffer from a severe "critical 'ghettoization'".<sup>5</sup> Mahoney adopts a similar line of argument in her analysis of three films; the aforementioned Leslie Harris film, as well as *Falling Down* (Joel Schumacher, 1993, USA) and *Night on Earth* (Jim Jarmusch, 1991, France/UK/Germany/USA/Japan). Whereas the two latter films, argues Mahoney, reinforce traditional male/female gender divisions, portraying their female characters as either domesticated or exoticised 'others', Harris's film by contrast imbues its female protagonist with a strong sense of individuality and self-determination, and most importantly, a "sense of rootedness in the city" (the film is set in Brooklyn).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Mahoney identifies a number of aesthetic features at the very beginning of the film that provide its protagonist Chantal (Ariyan A. Johnson) with a strong feeling of individuality and autonomy within *and* over her surroundings.

[T]he long sequence with the opening credits shows Chantal travelling across town and partly because she narrates to the camera and partly because of the movement and music of the scene, there is a sense of ownership, articulation and visibility which is extremely rare in representations of women in urban space... Chantal's relationship with the urban space of the 'projects' throughout the film enables her to work through larger questions of power and territory in both public and private space. Most importantly, the space which she occupies in the city and in the text is not a marginal or silent space; she is not the 'other' against whom the urban spectator defines 'himself', but rather, through her act of self-representation in the city, Chantal offers up a direct challenge to the traditional cultural positioning of women as other, as metaphor, as spatial ground, in masculine experience and appropriation of public space.<sup>7</sup>

*Just Another Girl on the I. R. T.* therefore imbues its central character with a discernible sense of independence and expressiveness through its use of direct address, music and camera movement. The opening images of *A, B, C...Manhattan* by contrast – a series of black-and-white still photographs, which introduce the film's three female protagonists, and which become a recurring motif throughout the film itself – suggest a strong feeling of stasis and entrapment. The voiceovers that accompany these still images, each one spoken in turn by each respective character, inform the viewer of each character's name and age, and provide important information about their hopes and desires. Colleen (Lucy Knight, figs 1-3) for instance, states that she wants to be a photographer, which gives her a kind of 'authorial' presence as she speaks over the film's opening images. Indeed, some of the photos are visible on the wall of Colleen's apartment in the film's opening sequence, although it is actually Kate's point-of-view with which the viewer is first aligned when the narrative begins. She also states that she wants to smoke and drink less, and

be a good mother to her daughter Stella. The wishes of Kacey (Erin Norris, figs 4-6) are somewhat less profound, explaining that she wants "to quit getting screwed over all the time" and to "sleep for ten hours straight". Kate (Sara Paul, figs 7-9) by contrast says that all she wants to do is simply "make music", a statement that is reinforced by the ensuing shot of her walking along

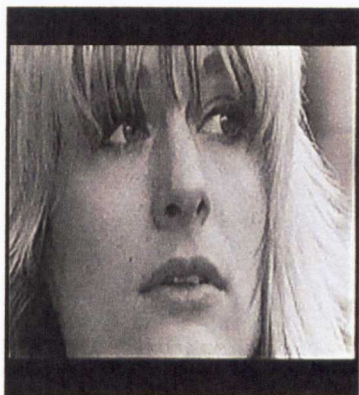


Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

a street with a guitar strapped to her back. The tone of each voiceover also gives the viewer an initial impression of each character's personality. Colleen's voice for example sounds markedly more weary and jaded than Kacey's livelier, more energetic tones. Kate's voice on the other hand is extremely subdued and quiet, giving a distinct impression of introversion and shyness, as she curtly utters her name and age, and ponders for a moment before deciding what it is exactly that she wants to do with her life. The composition of each photo is also suggestive, as the opening close-up shots of Colleen's face show her looking offscreen to her left, as if she is continually distracted by something, unable to concentrate on what is in front of her. The following shots of Kacey on the other hand emphasise the clothes she is wearing; sunglasses, a large black cap and a short silver jacket with a chain hanging from it and studs around the collar, as well as a spiky dog collar – a veritable picture of the rebellious teenage punk rocker. The close-up shots of Kate's face however, seem to show her glancing sideways at the camera momentarily, as if she is hiding from it, an image which seems to fit perfectly with the reserved and evasive tone of her voice. Her face is also partially concealed by her long, black, wavy hair and what appears to be a patterned wall cutting down the left-hand side of the frame.

Moreover, no sense of 'space' emerges from any of the images. Indeed, were it not for the film's title, it would not be possible to construe where the film is set from these opening images. Whereas the female protagonist of Harris's film exudes a strong sense of freedom, confidence and authority, Naderi's female protagonists are characterised initially by their immobility, uncertainty and indeterminacy.

Set over the course of one day, the film relates the harrowing events in the lives of Colleen, Kacey and Sara, all of whose lives appear to be centred around men, or in Colleen's case, the absence of a male figure. It is their respective struggles to take control of their own lives which links them all, and forms the overarching theme of the film (although the only time in the entire film in which all three characters meet each other and are on screen at the same time is in the opening scene, when Kate visits Colleen and Kacey's apartment to enquire about renting a room there, reflecting the often disconnected and fleeting nature of city life). Kate for instance yearns to get out of her incestuous and destructive relationship with her brother Stevie (Nikolai



Voloshuk), while Kacey searches desperately (and ultimately unsuccessfully) for her elusive ex-boyfriend Johnny O, who has apparently stolen her dog TJ in a fit of rage upon discovering that Kacey left him for another woman named Tricia (Carla Bedrostan). Colleen however, sits in her local bar, run by sympathetic bartender Janet (Rebecca Nelson), brooding all day over her decision to give up her daughter to a new family. Although her exact reasons for doing so are never fully revealed, it appears to be her inability to cope with raising a child by herself, and the absence of a traditional family unit that compels Colleen to give up her daughter. As she remarks during one of her many internal monologues:

It's hard to raise a little person in the city. Everything's so dirty, everyone's so cold. Except at Mona's. It's a bar. But it's the closest thing to a family that Stella or I have. That's pretty screwed up, isn't it? I guess it is. I know it is. Maybe that's why I'm doing what I'm doing. Today is the day Stella's gonna go to a new family...

Whereas the viewer is quite clearly invited to sympathise with the respective plights of Colleen, Kacey and Kate, all of the film's male characters are portrayed in a far more unsympathetic light. From the anonymous man carrying a bike who barges past Kate as she climbs the stairs to Colleen and Kacey's apartment at the very beginning of the film, to Charles (John Connolly), who is attracted to Colleen but too shy to reveal his feelings; to the macho bullshit spouted by the sexually predatory and infantile loafer Milo (Jon Abrahams); and the barfly Louis (Arnie Charnik), who brags endlessly about his previous sexual conquests and cruelly belittles Janet; those men that do populate Naderi's film are characterised by their insecurities, their insensitivity, their misogyny, and in Stevie's case, their neuroses. Charles for instance seems to be the perfect match for Colleen. Indeed he appears to be the only 'decent' man in the entire film, playing with her daughter Stella as if he were her father. But he lacks the courage to tell Colleen how he feels. His endearing shyness, indicated at one point in the small gesture he makes (and captured only fleetingly by the camera) when he removes his hat and brushes his hair to one side with his hand when Colleen first passes him by in Mona's, contrasts starkly with the exhibitionism and misogynistic bravado of Milo, who hits on Colleen from the moment he enters Mona's, much to the annoyance of Charles. Milo even relates and literally enacts the imaginary story of how he seduces a "beautiful woman" (Colleen) and humiliates her "asshole" boyfriend (Charles) in a bar, which concludes with him 'nailing' the woman "in the toilet".

It is in its depiction of the possessive, abusive relationship between Stevie and Kate however that the film makes its most powerful comment about the need of its female protagonists (with the aforementioned exception of Colleen, who nevertheless haunts Mona's with Charles, Milo and Louis throughout the film) to free themselves from their dependency upon the men in their lives. Relatively early in the film, via a voiceover which accompanies another series of black-and-white still photographs of Kate and Stevie lying in bed together in their apartment (which could not possibly have been taken by Colleen this time) the viewer is informed by Kate that she wants to end her relationship with Stevie. When she and her brother moved to New York she explains, "things started to change", they did not have to "pretend" anymore. Even though exactly *how* things changed and *what* they were pretending remains undisclosed, Kate's desire to break up with Stevie is explicitly linked with their move to the city, seeming to suggest that the city itself offers a newfound sense of freedom for Kate, though the exact nature of its role is revealed to be more ambiguous as the film progresses. Indeed the city seems to threaten, at the same time as it promises to facilitate, her search for independence

The city is portrayed symbolically as a potential prison for instance during the final climactic encounter between Kate and Stevie towards the end of the film, atop the roof of the building where Kate records music with her band. The scene is filmed entirely in one virtuoso, uninterrupted ten-minute take that follows the characters all over the building as they argue with each other. The unsteady and almost perpetual movement of the camera reflects not only the more general sense of confusion and disorientation experienced by both characters, but also the particular sense of entrapment experienced by Kate as a result of her brother's possessiveness. At one point in the scene for example, as Kate informs Stevie that she intends to move out of the apartment they currently share, a distraught Stevie comes up behind Kate, who stands in the foreground of the shot, and wraps his arms around her, embracing her (fig. 10). As he does so, the camera begins to circle around both of them, so the viewer can see Stevie kissing the back of Kate's neck through her hair, which he also caresses with his hands (fig. 11). As the camera moves further round, Kate gradually disappears entirely, as the back of Stevie's black overcoat fills up most of the screen, engulfing her completely (fig. 12). As the camera comes full circle

around to its previous position, Kate begins to tell Stevie that she has already decided to move out, and that she will continue to try and cover her end of the rent until Stevie can find a new place to live by himself. As she speaks, Stevie reaches his left arm across her chest, almost



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13

across her throat, as if he were going to strangle her, while his other hand creeps slowly up onto her right shoulder, as he holds on to her more tightly (fig. 13). The movement of the camera furthermore, mirrors the way in which Stevie's arms enfold Kate, adding to the sense of her restriction and captivity. All the while Stevie's actions are juxtaposed against the backdrop of the decidedly bleak and snow-covered Manhattan rooftops, explicitly drawing a parallel between his refusal to relinquish Kate, and the way in which the city itself looms over both of them, threatening to overwhelm them. Despite all of the "change" the move to New York instigates in Kate's life therefore, throughout the film the city is typically portrayed as a site of confusion and dislocation for all of the female protagonists, and in this scene, via an analogy with her suffocating relationship with Stevie, as a potential prison for Kate.



This sense of imprisonment is captured early on in the film, during the scene set in Kate and Stevie's apartment, and once again is intimately linked with the style of camera movement Naderi employs. As the camera therefore tracks back from Kate in a straight line as she gets out of bed – after pushing Stevie off her – and walks into the bathroom, the linear and restricted movement of the camera emphasises the narrowness and cramped nature of the apartment (fig. 14). The claustrophobic nature of the scene evokes Kate's own feelings of entrapment, caught up as she is in a stifling relationship with her brother. This is additionally implied by the intrusive behaviour of the camera, and how it reflects the way in which Stevie constantly invades Kate's space. For instance, the camera follows Kate into the toilet as she sits down to urinate, whereupon Stevie's forearm enters the left-hand side of the frame, right hand outstretched, as he orders Kate to hand over the toothbrush she is holding in her mouth (fig. 15). Kate turns the handle towards him, only to grip onto the toothbrush briefly with her teeth before Stevie yanks it free. Throughout the remainder of the scene, Stevie's behaviour demonstrates further how he infringes on Kate's space, ordering her to move over as she sits in the bathtub so he can climb in with her, constantly leaning in towards her (fig. 16), forcing her finally to physically push him



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17

away. As he steps out of the bathtub, he grabs her legs and holds her underwater for a few moments, as if to restate his control over her. The way the camera lingers over the image of Kate lying underwater, forearms raised beside her head and turned upwards (fig. 17), evokes very strongly John Everett Millais's famous painting of Ophelia drowning, and consequently William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, which itself contains heavily incestuous overtones. The overall effect of the scene is to show the overbearing and fraught nature of Kate and Stevie's relationship, and how Stevie encroaches, at times quite violently, on Kate's sense of space and independence, an encroachment that is not only displayed by Stevie's domineering and abusive behaviour, but also by the invasive movement of the camera itself.

The apparent insensitivity and invasiveness of the camera is illustrated later in the film, during the scene in which Colleen finally gives up her daughter Stella. At first the camera seems to maintain a respectful distance from the exchange between Colleen and Stella's 'new' family, filming the handover – which takes place on the sidewalk outside Mona's – from within the bar



Figure 18

itself, through the window, so the viewer cannot actually hear anything that is said between the two parties (fig. 18). The distance of the camera from the events unfolding onscreen, while certainly underplaying the emotional impact of the scene, rather than alienating the viewer from Colleen's plight, paradoxically renders the scene all the more



poignant, precisely because of the camera's apparent deference to her suffering. When Colleen re-enters the bar however, the camera follows her (once again) into the toilet, as she leans her head against the wall, her back to the camera (fig. 19). The camera then comes right up beside her (fig. 20), as if trying to get a look at her face, at which point Colleen turns away (fig. 21), almost as if in response to the intrusive presence of the camera itself, and leans against the other wall across from her, before looking at her reflection in the mirror hanging over the sink (fig. 22). The prying movement of the camera at this point in the scene is very much at odds with the previous compassion it had seemingly displayed towards Colleen's distress.



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22

Kacey by contrast, initially displays a degree of familiarity with her surroundings that Kate and Colleen do not. She visits fellow squatter friends in the neighbourhood for instance and chats with them. However, as she gradually fails to track down her dog, her ex-boyfriend Johnny O and her estranged lover Tricia, so the frequent tracking shots of Kacey wandering the streets of her neighbourhood, endlessly putting up missing pet posters, show her increasing alienation from her

surroundings. Indeed, rather than successfully inscribing Kacey into the space she occupies or the landscape she moves through, Naderi's use of prolonged, extremely mobile tracking shots show Kacey moving in conflicting directions and looking confusedly around her, reflecting her growing bewilderment as she wanders the streets randomly, constantly searching but never actually getting anywhere (see figs 23-25). When Kacey finally does track down Tricia, she attempts to seek comfort in her arms, only to be turned away. At precisely the moment when a long take would perhaps have been best suited to capturing fully Kacey's happiness at finding

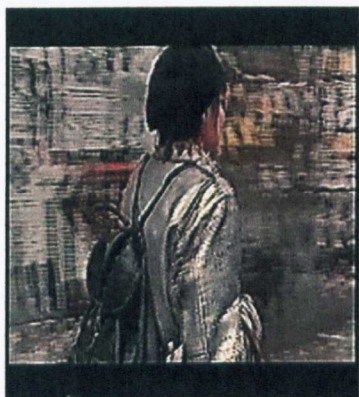


Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

Tricia, a series of disruptive jump-cuts – beginning when Kacey embraces Tricia, only to have her affections spurned – serve not only (quite literally) to break up the continuous 'flow' of the camera movement, but also reflect the disconnected and unreciprocated nature of Kacey's feelings towards Tricia.

Although the camera therefore tracks very closely the movements of the film's three central female characters, the overall effect is not so much to imbue these characters with a sense of autonomy or centredness, but on the contrary, a sense of vulnerability and disorientation. Indeed, rather than moving 'with' Colleen, Kacey and Kate, the camera appears to function independently of them, exercising its control over them and imposing its watchful eye on them when it pleases, in an insidious rather than voyeuristic manner. That the constant sense of motion evoked by the film's camera movement seems to be reflective of the protagonists' inability to cope with the hectic pace of city life, and to take control of their own lives, is made explicit at one point when Kacey says to Tricia: "I just need everything to stop so I can catch up!" In this sense, the series of black-and-white still photographs that punctuate the narrative at various



points throughout the film take on an added importance. For it is only during these temporary pauses in the narrative, these brief moments of stasis (which are also accompanied significantly by the protagonists' internal monologues) that Colleen, Kacey and Kate are truly able to express themselves coherently and speak their minds. During these vignettes, in contrast to majority of the film, the viewer is permitted access to the most intimate thoughts and desires of these characters.

Given that Colleen, Kacey and Kate are only able to express themselves when their images are 'frozen' on screen, the film would seem to reinforce traditional stereotypes of women in cinema as passive objects. The conclusion of the film however is particularly striking, for the way in which Colleen and Kate apparently begin to exercise their own control over the camera, by literally stopping it in its tracks with a single direct glance. For instance, as the editing intercuts between the three characters during the film's closing moments, after they have all seemingly reached a turning point in their lives (Kate has left Stevie, Colleen has given up her daughter, and Kacey has finally abandoned her search for her dog), Colleen turns her head and looks over her shoulder directly into the camera, bringing it to a sudden halt (fig. 26). The effect is jarring, particularly given the obtrusive presence that the camera has exercised thus far in the film. Likewise, as the camera once again encircles Kate as she stands on a street corner looking aimlessly around her after her altercation with Stevie, so too do her eyes bring the camera to a standstill directly in front of her as she stares straight into it (fig. 27). While it is certainly suggestive that Colleen and Kate should possess the ability to 'confront' or 'stop' the camera so to speak by the end of the film, to what extent all three characters have been empowered by the



Figure 26



Figure 27

events that have taken place over the course of the film remains ambiguous. Emanuel Levy for instance, in her *Variety* review of the film, has argued that it "seldom persuades that its director really understands his female characters' complex psyches and souls".<sup>8</sup> Such an argument however, fails to take into account the care and attention with which the film delineates the respective plights of Colleen, Kacey and Kate, as well as the predominantly sympathetic and non-judgemental attitude Naderi displays towards his characters, despite the aggressive nature of the camerawork noted above. Despite the emotional upheavals they all experience by the end of the film however, and the cathartic nature of the conclusion itself, the overall impression of their lives remains one of confusion and aimlessness. The picture of New York City (or to be more specific, Manhattan) that emerges from the film is not simply, in general terms, that of a city of loneliness and disaffection, but a city that is especially hostile to the hopes and dreams of its female inhabitants. As this chapter now goes on to demonstrate however, Naderi's subsequent film *Marathon* provides a stark contrast with the overall outlook of its predecessor. Moreover, despite the fact that *Marathon* once again features a female character in its central role, the film's non-gender specific portrayal of urban alienation offers a perspective on New York City that can quite clearly be interpreted as reflective of Naderi's own personal attitude towards his adopted home.

### **Filling in the Blanks**

In *A, B, C...Manhattan*, Kacey's hopeless search for her dog TJ functions as a metaphor for something else that is missing in her life (whatever that other 'something else' may be). Likewise, the obsession of *Marathon*'s protagonist, Gretchen (once again played by Sara Paul), with beating her own personal record of completing seventy-seven crossword puzzles in one day, is symbolic of her need to impose some kind of order or control over her life, and the hectic city in which she lives (which once again, is New York city). As Dave Kehr notes in his *New York Times* review of the film: "By performing this strange, private ritual...in the most public and chaotic of places [mostly the New York subway system], Gretchen seems to be waging her own private war against the meaningless din of urban existence. As absurd as her gesture may be, it is one way of imposing order on arbitrariness."<sup>9</sup>



Indeed, *Marathon* is as much an anatomy of New York City itself as it is a character study. As the film begins, the editing intercuts between images of Gretchen doing her crossword puzzles on a subway train, and shots of a map of New York City on the wall of the train beside her, which is itself broken up by the camera into parts according to its five constitutive districts; Queens, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Staten Island. The concept of New York city as being a 'puzzle' of sorts itself, a labyrinth that Gretchen needs to navigate, is developed further by the subway station signs which the viewer frequently catches sight of as the train doors open and close. Signs such as '41<sup>st</sup> Street' and '196<sup>th</sup> Street' correspond to the numerical clues Gretchen reads in her crossword puzzles, while the frequent shots of the interweaving railway lines form a visual link with the interconnected blocks of empty, white boxes Gretchen fills in (see figs 28-31). This parallel is made explicit towards the end of the film, when the screeching sound of the subway trains accompany a series of shots of the numerous crossword puzzles Gretchen has stuck all over the walls of her apartment.



Figure 28



Figure 29

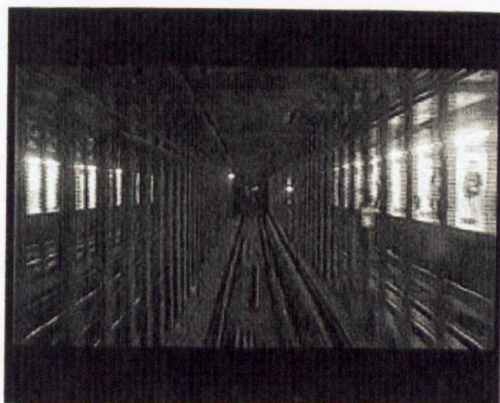


Figure 30

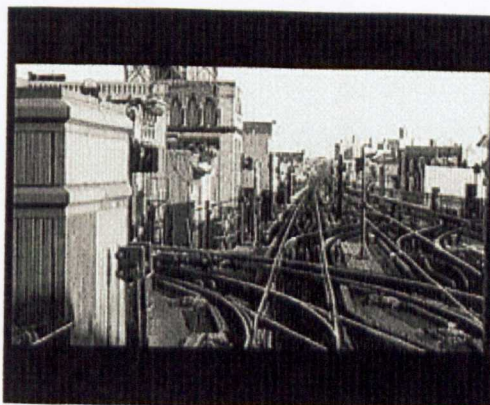


Figure 31



As for Gretchen herself, the viewer never learns of the reasons behind her compulsion to perform this 'marathon'. It is revealed however that it is an annual tradition she inherited from her mother (whose own personal record the viewer is informed is eighty-six puzzles), via a series of voiceovers spoken by her mother, in the form of telephone messages left on Gretchen's answering machine. These messages occasionally accompany images of Gretchen either walking through the subway or along the street, and it is through these messages that Gretchen's mother offers her daughter advice (not to drink too much coffee, the several different ways of spelling the word 'omelette', etc.). The mother's clear concern for her daughter's well-being also hints at some previous trauma in Gretchen's life, her mother at one point going so far as to say: "I know you need all that noise to concentrate, but it's just not safe for you anymore." What exactly happened in the past however, remains unsaid. That Gretchen has essentially followed in her mother's footsteps perhaps suggests a family rivalry, a desire to outdo her mother. Indeed the way Gretchen's mother constantly calls her daughter to enquire how the marathon is proceeding implies a desire on her part to relive the experience vicariously through her daughter. But even this relationship is left unexplored, Gretchen and her mother never actually speaking to each other at any point in the film. Gretchen's apartment also contains no clues as to her personality, her background, or her occupation, covered as the walls are almost completely by hundreds of crossword puzzles (fig. 32), although it is revealed – as the camera passes over some notes from previous years strewn about the apartment – that Gretchen has been undertaking this 'marathon' on a yearly basis since 1992. Gretchen's reasons for doing the marathon therefore are not as important as the actual marathon itself, and the effect it has upon her.

In this sense, the use of sound itself plays an integral role throughout the film. For initially, Gretchen relies on the discordant noise of the subway trains to help focus her attention on the task confronting her, their repetitive rumbling noise providing a kind of mental vacuum for her in which she can concentrate her thoughts. As the film progresses however it becomes clear that the constant noise bombarding Gretchen's senses begins to overwhelm her, and hinder her in her efforts to complete her 'marathon'. Thus the use of sound begins to reflect Gretchen's growing

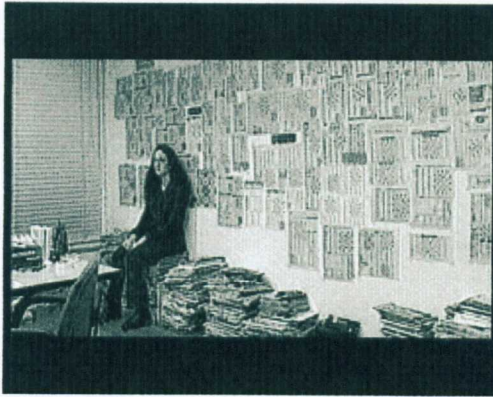


Figure 32



Figure 33

confusion and isolation from the people and the environment around her, a separation that is also communicated visually by the numerous shots of Gretchen with her fingers in her ears, or standing *in-between* the sliding doors which connect the train carriages in the subway, her eyes closed, physically shutting herself off from the cacophony of noise around her (fig. 33). At one point, the babble of voices in one of the subway stations Gretchen passes through dies down, to be subsumed entirely by the low buzzing noise of her handheld fan, which she holds close to her face. As soon as she turns the fan off however, the voices immediately come surging back to the surface of the soundtrack once again. The extremely subjective use of the sound at these points is vital to establishing a link between Gretchen and the viewer, particularly in a film that contains so little dialogue and character explication. For as the viewer shares these introspective moments of silence with Gretchen, they gain access, however briefly, to her subjective point-of-view, and are allowed to experience the incessant (dis)harmony of noise as she experiences it.

Gretchen's increasing (and somewhat extreme) alienation from the people and the city around her is also manifested by her inability to concentrate when she hears human voices distinctly over the tumult of noise surrounding her. For instance, in one scene she rides through the city atop a tourist bus, the sound of the traffic emanating from below providing a suitable background noise for her to focus her thoughts. She has to leave the bus however when the tourist guide begins to speak through a microphone to the other passengers. Similarly, when she arrives home from her journey, she tries to recreate the noise of the subway trains in her apartment by playing a tape of the recorded sounds. When she hears a voice in the background

however, making an announcement over a tannoy loudspeaker, she rushes quickly over to her stereo to fast-forward by it.

Gretchen's mounting frustration with her inability to focus, as she falls further and further behind schedule, eventually reaches breaking point, as she turns on all the taps in her kitchen and bathroom, and all of her electrical appliances, such as her washing machine, microwave, radio, alarm clock and stereo, to create as much noise as possible before storming out of her apartment. Her outburst acts as a kind of release however, for when she returns she decides to make one final attempt to break her record before time runs out. Significantly, she does so unaccompanied by the simulated noise of traffic or subway trains, or even the steady ticking noise of the pendulum clock she sits beside her briefly on her desk, which she slams down comically upon finding it a distraction.

Unlike *A, B, C...Manhattan* therefore, *Marathon* does not conclude on a seemingly equivocal or downbeat note. Gretchen clearly overcomes her dependency on noise to complete her marathon – or figuratively speaking, her addiction to the chaos of city life, and her attempt to impose order upon it. Breaking her own record by half a puzzle, the closing images of Gretchen leaning out of her apartment window, looking at snow falling on a calm and still New York City (figs 34-7) gives a sense of resolution to *Marathon's* narrative that its predecessor *A, B, C...Manhattan* significantly lacked.



Figure 34



Figure 35





Figure 36



Figure 37

Whereas the conclusion of *A, B, C...Manhattan* left its female protagonists in a state of spatial and psychological limbo, there is a strong sense by the end of *Marathon* that Gretchen has effectively exorcised her demons (whatever the exact nature of these demons may be), that she has decided to accept rather than resist the complexity of city life, and is at peace with herself. Moreover, as the camera moves further and further away from Gretchen, leaving her behind, physically detaching itself from her perspective as it were, to focus on the film's closing image of a picturesque and serene snow-caked New York skyline (fig. 38), it becomes possible to discern Naderi's personal vision of New York City. Indeed, despite the film's consistent focus on the relationship between mother and daughter (who never speak directly to one another after all), *Marathon's* portrayal of urban alienation is thoroughly non-gendered in nature. Which is to say



Figure 38

that outside of her relationship with her mother, none of the exigencies of city life which trouble Gretchen so clearly are at all contingent upon her social status as a woman. It is this non-gender specificity, as well as the absence of any other prominent male or female characters in the film besides Gretchen, combined with the way in which the camera seems to take the viewer away from Gretchen's perspective to provide an 'impossible' bird's-eye view of New York, that enables the closing images of *Marathon* to be construed as a personal tribute of sorts on Naderi's part, to the city in which he now lives and works. Naderi therefore may very well continue to look at US society through the eyes of an outsider, as the largely disaffected and restless nature of his characters would strongly suggest. But the ruthless and grime-stained dissection of underclass city life that so strongly characterised *A, B, C...Manhattan*, has in *Marathon* come to be replaced by a vision of New York which, although just as rigorously schematic in its outlook as its predecessor, is on this occasion also infused with a hopeless romanticism.

### Iranian Cinema in Focus

Amir Naderi was a very good photographer. I edited the film *Harmonica* for him. He really likes me... But, well, Amir Naderi should know that he is not John Ford, even though all his life he has tried to be John Ford. He should know that he cannot ride on the crest of the wave of the American cinema. The American cinema is monopolized by a group of wealthy businessmen. Today's American cinema is not even the classic cinema of the U.S. It has declined and swallows a person such as Amir Naderi.<sup>10</sup>

(Sohrab Shahid Saless)

One question that Saless's observation prompts, is whether or not Naderi even wants to ride on the crest of the wave of US cinema, or even regards himself as a disciple of John Ford, or as a John Ford imitator. Indeed, far from contributing to or redefining Ford's epic vision of the Western landscape and 'the Frontier' via the medium of US cinema, as the above analysis of *A, B, C, Manhattan* and *Marathon* demonstrates, the films Naderi has directed since leaving Iran – all low-budget and decidedly small-scale in nature – seem more concerned with exploring this cinema's relationship with that most *urban* of US cities, New York. In this sense, Naderi's US films have much more in common with the gritty, hand-held, on-the-street style of many New York 'indie' films, perhaps most notably films such as *Rhythm Thief* (Matthew Harrison, 1994, USA).



One of the effects of much 'independent' New York cinema of course has been to debunk archetypal, romanticised representations of New York City in mainstream Hollywood cinema, both classical and contemporary. As Leonard Quart has noted:

[T]here are films like the frothy, forgettable *You've Got Mail* (Nora Ephron, 1998), which recently turned New York's Upper West Side into an urban paradise just as Woody Allen did in a more difficult decade for the Upper East Side's streets in *Manhattan* (1978). What one remembers after watching this film are the affluent, smart-looking people sitting in cafes; the montage of distinctive, beautiful small stores opening on a sunlit morning; and side streets filled with handsome brownstones and blossoming trees. There are no homeless people camped on the sidewalks, just a glistening, pedestrian-filled, brightly coloured urban neighbourhood that anybody in the audience who likes cities would want to live in... A film like *You've Got Mail* goes back to Hollywood's version of New York as a dream city, evoked in musicals like *On the Town* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1949) and *The Band Wagon* (Vincente Minnelli)... constructing New York as a dream city is less an act of will or a selective vision in the late 1990s than when Woody Allen was creating it in the dark days of the late 1970s. There are enough radiant surfaces and genuine urban beauty to focus on in New York – so the dream city does not have to seem utterly fabulous.<sup>11</sup>

Naderi by contrast, despite the immaculate cinematography of some of his films, like most of his New York 'indie' predecessors and contemporaries, paints an alternative picture of New York City, one that is largely devoid of its familiar landmarks and picturesque vistas. Indeed, the image of New York that emerges from Naderi's US films is an altogether less glossy, dirtier and seedier vision of the city than that which is so often seen in mainstream Hollywood cinema. As Andrew Sarris observes in his review of *Manhattan By Numbers*, the first instalment of Naderi's 'New York trilogy', "I am indebted to Mr. Naderi for plunging into the gritty experience of Manhattan without an airbrush on his lens. Of course, he couldn't afford one, but he has made a virtue of necessity all the same."<sup>12</sup>

Naderi's émigré works therefore begin to raise some of the problems that confront us when considering films made by Iranian émigrés that do not necessarily fit into the evolutionary model suggested for the development of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema in the preceding chapter. On the one hand, the unmistakeable differences between Naderi's Iranian and US films would perhaps suggest the emergence of an exilic and/or diasporic sensibility in his émigré works. On the other hand, to understand Naderi's films purely in terms of the director's own experience of 'displacement' is to prejudge these works, and invests too much authority in the figure of the director as the only means by which one can engage with and understand these

films. As the above analyses are intended to illustrate, although slight glimpses of Naderi's personal vision of New York City can be detected at certain points in *Marathon* and even *A, B, C...Manhattan*, both films address and explore many other themes and issues that are by no means wholly contingent upon an understanding of their director as an Iranian émigré filmmaker.

Paradoxically therefore, Naderi's émigré works expand our knowledge of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking, as well as the various manifestations of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema more generally, at the same as they resist assimilation into such potentially restrictive categories. Considered in close detail, they point not only to the inability of traditional notions of 'national cinemas' to account for émigré filmmakers such as Naderi, but also to the increasingly deterritorialised nature of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema itself.

Where, one might ask, does this leave a filmmaker such as Naderi? Are his works simply neither here nor there, or are they capable of occupying more than one position, of belonging to more than one cinema at the same time? As noted above, although Naderi may not be part of the John Ford School of filmmakers to which Saless presumes Naderi wishes to belong, his films clearly fit into a more recent history of New York independent cinema, most closely associated with the work of John Cassavetes, and contemporary 'indie' filmmakers such as Jim Jarmusch. It is Naderi's affinity with this particular aspect of US cinema (which is just as amorphous and contradictory in its conceptual make-up as Iranian cinema), or this particular group of US filmmakers rather, which most clearly identifies Naderi as a quintessentially American filmmaker, as well as one of Iran's most important directors. This thesis now goes on however to pose these questions in relation to the works of a far more prolific Iranian émigré filmmaker, this time working in Europe. For through his German works, Sohrab Shahid Saless symbolises perhaps more strongly than any other filmmaker considered in this thesis thus far, the fundamental yet contradictory nature of the links between the New Iranian Cinema, and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 47.

<sup>2</sup> Judy Stone, *Eye on the World: Conversations with International Filmmakers*, (Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1997), 382-4.

<sup>3</sup> See the respective introductions to *The Cinematic City*, ed. David B. Clarke (London: Routledge, 1997), 1-18, and *Cinema & the City: Film and Urban Societies in a Global Context*, ed. Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Mahoney, "'The People in Parentheses': Space Under Pressure in the Postmodern City" in *The Cinematic City*, 168-85.

<sup>5</sup> Mahoney, 169-70.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 181-2.

<sup>8</sup> Emanuel Levy, "A, B, C...Manhattan", *Variety*, May 26 – June 1 (1997): 179.

<sup>9</sup> David Kehr, 'Marathon', *New York Times*, April 2, 2004,

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9F05E1D61239F931A35757C0A9629C8B63>.

<sup>10</sup> Hamid-Reza Sadr, "...and the World Became His: An Exclusive Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless", *Film International* 5, no.3-4 (Spring 1998): 54.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard Quart, "New York City in American film" in *American Film and Politics From Reagan to Bush Jr.*, ed. Philip John Davies and Paul Wells, 102-3, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Sarris, "Manhattan By Numbers: True Grit And An Orwellian Spirit", *The New York Observer*, November 1994, <http://www.ifvc.com/the-new-york-observer.htm>.

#### **Chapter 4: Close Up 2 – Sohrab Shahid Saless**

[L]ook at the case of [Sohrab Shahid] Saless. He left Iran during the shah's time. He lived in Germany twenty-five years and made fourteen films there. But when he died, all the German publications called him an Iranian filmmaker... Then, when I spoke to Simon Field three years ago about showing a retrospective of his films at the Rotterdam Film Festival, he said, "But he's not Iranian – he made most of his films in Germany." So he can't be appreciated as part of any national cinema. What does that say about "us"?<sup>1</sup>

(Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa)

Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa's comments encapsulate some of the main problems which confront us when considering the films of Sohrab Shahid Saless, and for that matter, any émigré filmmaker (and by "us" I mean fellow readers, though the "us" Saeed-Vafa mentions could refer to any number of people living and working in Europe and North America; film festival organisers, cinema audiences, film critics, and academics alike). Her statement exposes the limitations not only of understanding the works of émigré filmmakers such as Saless solely in terms of their director's national origins, but also the practice of viewing national cinemas themselves as being organised purely along geographical boundaries. Saless and his films certainly seem to have been the victims of such longstanding tendencies.

Saless left Iran when the Shah's regime stopped production of his third feature film *Quarantine*, just as Iranian cinema was beginning to receive international attention, and arrived in Germany at a time when the New German Cinema was hitting its full stride in the mid-1970s. Separated from the Iranian New Wave – a movement he helped to initiate before its 'interruption' by the revolution – and overlooked in academic circles as an important part of the New German Cinema – a fact that is as much due to the unavailability of his films, as well as their problematic and uncompromising nature, as it is to his nationality – Saless has slipped in between the gaps of film history, suspended in a kind of extraterritorial limbo.

Because of his liminal status as an émigré filmmaker, as well as the relentlessly dark, pessimistic and claustrophobic tone of his films, the image of Saless as the exiled Iranian filmmaker *par excellence* has been established and solidified posthumously in a remarkably short space of time following his death in Chicago in June 1998. For example, in the program for the 2003 Third Diaspora Film Festival – which was known in its first two years specifically as the

*Iranian Diaspora Film Festival* – there is a brief section devoted entirely to Saleh, entitled ‘The Legend’. The festival also has a tradition of concluding each year with a rare screening of one of Saleh’s films. Additionally, in an earlier essay on his films, Saeed-Vafa calls Saleh “the greatest Iranian director working in exile”,<sup>2</sup> while Hamid Naficy maintains that his “critically dystopic films, his successful but marginalized career as a filmmaker in Germany, and his reasons for finally leaving his adopted homeland for yet another exile all point to a deep undercurrent of exile in his life and oeuvre.”<sup>3</sup>

Saleh is also credited – along with other New Wave filmmakers such as Masud Kimia’i, Dariush Mehrjui, Abbas Kiarostami, Amir Naderi, Parviz Kimiavi and Bahram Beiza’i – with pioneering the use of a number of stylistic and narrative techniques in Iranian cinema. Briefly, these include the use of long takes and long shots, the use of non-professional actors, and a non-dramatic, observational style of storytelling, elements that have since become the hallmarks of almost every other internationally acclaimed Iranian director. Given his influential role in the history of Iranian cinema, and the extent to which his German works undoubtedly embody a kind of exilic aesthetic and sensibility, Saleh’s body of work would appear to be the ideal case study with which to demonstrate the existence of an Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora. That is not quite the approach however that I wish to adopt in this chapter. For as the previous chapter on Amir Naderi’s New York films illustrates, there are definite problems in repeatedly imposing an exclusively exilic reading upon the works of émigré filmmakers, let alone a filmmaker such as Saleh, whose overall oeuvre manifests such clear aesthetic and thematic continuities. Not least among these problems is that it risks reducing Saleh’s films to merely one level of meaning; namely, of being reflective – subconsciously or otherwise – of the state or condition of living in exile. It also risks overlooking the similarities between Saleh’s pre-exilic and post-exilic films (though Saeed-Vafa’s well-judged essay certainly cannot be accused of this). Moreover, such readings tend to undervalue the adaptability Saleh displayed after arriving and subsequently embarking upon his filmmaking career in Germany; a fact that should hardly be surprising, considering Saleh originally studied cinema and filmmaking in Paris and Vienna before making his first short documentary films in Iran, although he would later dismiss such studies as “stupid”.<sup>4</sup> Compared to other Iranian filmmakers working outside Iran, only Houshang Allahyari in Austria



has been as prolific in terms of feature film production. That the versatility and consistency of vision of a filmmaker such as Saless should be neglected in favour of foregrounding the exilic aspects of his cinema thus seems particularly selective and narrow-sighted, especially when other émigré filmmakers – such as Max Ophüls for instance, to provide a deliberately incongruous example – seem to resist wholly exilic readings or interpretations of their works, precisely because they appear to display such striking versatility and continuity throughout their careers (in Ophüls case, numerous films in four different countries, in four different languages!). Of course there are many differences between the kinds of films Ophüls directed and those Saless made, as well as between the specific circumstances of their respective exiles (a European in America and a Middle Easterner in Europe), but this is not my point. My point quite simply is that Saless's films are far too rich and multilayered to be viewed exclusively as exilic works, merely because they are directed by an Iranian émigré.

For on the one hand, there is undoubtedly a very strong autobiographical streak running throughout all of Saless's films, none more so than *Rüsen für Afrika/Roses for Africa* (1991, Germany), in which the film's male protagonist Paul (Silvan-Pierre Leirich), who longs to leave Germany and join his brother in Africa, is by Saless's own admission the director's alter ego. As Saless stated in an interview conducted by Naficy in 1997, just a year prior to his death: "Paul's attitude and behaviour is exactly like mine. Whatever he does, I do. I wanted to see myself on screen as I am."<sup>5</sup>

Considering Paul's alcoholism and self-destructive behaviour, this is disarming honesty on the part of Saless, revealing the director's own sense of despair and isolation in German society. On the other hand, Saless's German films do not depict a particularly *Iranian* experience of displacement. Although nearly all of his films touch on the theme of displacement in one way or another, and hence lend themselves quite clearly to exilic readings, it is mostly on a broadly physical (*Roses for Africa*), psychological (*Tagebuch eines Liebenden/Diary of a Lover*, (1977, West Germany)), generational (*Tabi'ate Bijan/Still Life* (1974, Iran)/*Reifezeit/A Time of Maturity*, (1976, West Germany)/*Der Weidenbaum/The Willow Tree*, (1983, West Germany)) or racial (*Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland/Hans – A Boy in Germany*, (1985, West Germany)) level, rather than a specifically cultural one. The exceptions to this rule would be *In Der Fremde* aka

*Dar Ghorbat/Far From Home* (1975, West Germany/Iran) and *Empfänger Unbekannt/Addressee Unknown* (1983, West Germany). However both of these films take not Iranian, but *Turkish* experiences of displacement as their subject matter.

In this sense I am therefore once again arguing – perhaps somewhat obviously after all my methodological manoeuvring – that if the question of national cinema can no longer merely be reduced to an issue of geography, then it equally cannot merely be reduced to an issue of authorship. Claiming that *A Time of Maturity* for instance is an example of an exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema simply by virtue of the fact that it is directed by an Iranian émigré shows scant regard for the narrative strategies and thematic content of the film itself. In this case it also seems somewhat ethically dubious, given that the filmmaker in question has explicitly stated that: “I do not belong to the Iranian diaspora cinema.”<sup>6</sup> To further emphasise my point, to argue that a Classical Hollywood film such as *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (1948, USA) is an example of a collective exilic and diasporic German cinema, simply because it was directed by Max Ophüls, would be similarly problematic.

Saless’s films are also not effectively viewed in relation to the national cinema of the host country in which he lived and worked after leaving Iran; in this case West German cinema of the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, or to give it its popular appellation, the New German Cinema. Naficy stresses the need to avoid examining the films of exiled directors such as Saless as completely separate from the national cinema of their host countries, because the two, he rightly points out, influence each other. But the number of thematic parallels Naficy lists between the films of the New German Cinema and their exilic counterparts – such as “a preoccupation with homeland...a utopian yearning for faraway utopian places...a homesick nostalgia for the past...a schizoid perception of the present, loss of identity and belonging, and a desire for social others and foreigner”<sup>7</sup> – serves to generalise rather than particularise the complex nature of the numerous parallels that can be drawn between Saless’s films and those of his New German contemporaries. Even Saeed-Vafa’s description of Saless as a “major filmmaker” of the New German Cinema, in her short documentary film on Saless, seems somewhat unsubstantiated, with little explanation as to how and why Saless is important to the New German Cinema movement itself. Indeed, Saless is continually omitted from any histories that are compiled or

studies that are conducted of the New German Cinema. As Naficy observes: "Eurocentric scholars in Europe and North America have paid little attention to him, treating him as more of a guest than a contender."<sup>8</sup>

Despite these problems, it is not my intention to counter an exilic reading of Saleh's films by arguing for their inclusion into the canon of films that make up the New German Cinema, or to somehow prove or illustrate the 'Germanness' of Saleh's émigré films. Neither is it my intention to undermine or underplay the benefits of regarding Saleh's German films as valuable examples of (Iranian) exilic and diasporic filmmaking. Rather the aim of this chapter, much like the preceding one, is not only to provide a contrast to, as well as highlight the limitations of, the collective analysis of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking conducted in the second chapter of this thesis, by way of a more focused individual analysis of Saleh's oeuvre, but also to open up Saleh's films to alternative readings, something that seems essential if they are to acquire any relevance outside of the limited frame of reference in which they have so far been discussed. For what struck me upon my own first viewing of many of Saleh's films, conditioned as this viewing experience was by much the literature referenced above which I had read prior to viewing them, was not their exilic overtones, but rather (what at this point I refer to only vaguely as) their portrayal of the 'everyday'. Indeed I would go so far as to argue that it is this thematic and stylistic trait, rather than a relentlessly morbid obsession with depicting the traumatic effects of life in exile, that can be seen as constituting the defining characteristic of Saleh's oeuvre. The obvious criticism of such an argument is that it merely substitutes one restrictive paradigm for another. On the contrary however, it is my hope that a consideration of Saleh's portrayal of the 'everyday' will make clear some of the tensions and inadequacies which surround viewing his films solely as examples of an exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema.

This chapter then concludes with an examination of the similarities, as well as the differences, between the films of Saleh and Abbas Kiarostami. The parallels between the respective styles and oeuvres of these two directors, the former being arguably Iran's most influential pre-revolutionary filmmaker, and the latter Iran's foremost post-revolutionary filmmaker, constitutes one of the most significant and compelling links between the New Iranian Cinema and

Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, and will hopefully serve to bring this overview of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking full circle.

### **Saless and the 'everyday'**

The concept of the everyday itself, or what exactly can be considered to constitute the 'everyday', has traditionally been notoriously difficult to define. What may be a daily occurrence or practice for a filmmaker working in early 1970s Iran after all may differ greatly from the everyday experiences and routine of a filmmaker working in West Germany at the same time. Ivone Margulies, in her study of the "hyperrealist everyday" in the films of Chantal Akerman, has shown how cinematic representations of the everyday throughout the twentieth century have been closely linked to the ever-evolving debates concerning concepts of cinematic realism.<sup>9</sup> How to represent the everyday has thus been a constant problem for filmmakers from different countries and eras alike, and one that is not without its political and ethical implications. As Rey Chow states, in her recent essay on the uses of the everyday in *Wo de fu qin mu qin/The Road Home* (Zhang Yimou, 2000, China) and *Fa yeung nin wa/In The Mood For Love* (Wong Kar Wai, 2000, Hong Kong/France/Thailand), the 'everyday' is a precariously vague and abstract concept that is extremely vulnerable to ideological abuse.

The everyday is an open, empty category, one that allows critics to fill it with critical agendas as they please. This is why both its defenders and its detractors can use it to stake their political claims, either as the bedrock of reality, the ground zero of cultural representation, or as a misleading set of appearances concealing ideological exploitation, a collective false consciousness.

"For these reasons," continues Chow, "it is perhaps less interesting simply to unravel the argumentative pros and cons around the everyday as such than to consider specific uses of the everyday in representational practices..."<sup>10</sup> In Saless's case, his representation of the everyday can be understood as forming a critique of the societies in which he lived and worked – of the Shah's grand modernization plans for Iran and its infrastructure, which left so many 'ordinary' Iranians behind in its wake, and of German society's intolerance and latent racism – a critique sustained throughout his entire career. It can also be understood as offering an alternative to more traditional or dominant forms of filmmaking, not only Hollywood cinema, but also other forms of filmmaking popular within Iran and Germany. As Saless himself wrote, the types of films

that dominated Iranian cinema screens during the sixties when he was a teenager were characterised by their escapist and melodramatic tendencies:

Aside from such new works [such as *Downtown* by Farokh Ghaffari], the market was predominated by run-of-the-mill Iranian and Indian films: singing, dancing, weeping and all that jazz. I always looked for real life in them but I could see little. Or in Chekov's words "they did not mirror the realities of life as they were." This made me think of going to film school when I was only sixteen.<sup>11</sup>

In contrast to popular films of the period in both Iran *and* Germany, Saless's films are characterised by their emotional reticence and undramatic tone. There are certainly no musical numbers – and hardly any weeping – in any of Saless's films. Indeed he has expressed his aversion to the excessive use of music in cinema in general, and the way music is typically used to manipulate the viewer's emotions, describing it as "cheating". "For me," Saless states, demonstrating his preference for ambient noises, "the sound of the wind, thunder, or drops of water serve as music."<sup>12</sup> This observation is certainly borne out by Saless's films, most of which contain little non-diegetic music or none whatsoever.

In a similar manner, Saless wrote a short but scathing essay criticising what he perceived to be the increasing Americanisation of the West German film industry, as well as the penchant for 'classic' literary adaptations so prevalent among New German Cinema directors; or as Saless puts it, the laziness in rescuing "dead geniuses from the grave", so as to increase their chances of receiving funding for their projects. In typically contrary fashion, Saless's own literary adaptations (with the exception of *The Willow Tree*, an adaptation of a short story by Anton Chekov) are of works by more recent and obscure German writers. *Roses for Africa* for instance, is an adaptation of the novel of the same name by the modern German novelist, Ludwig Fels. The wartime novel *Die Blaue Stunde/The Blue Hour* (1977), by the German-Jewish writer Hans Frick – a novelist who seems to have been largely overlooked by German literary scholars, and whose troubled life appears to have resembled Saless's remarkably – was also the inspiration for *Hans – A Boy in Germany*. Overall, Saless's essay reveals a clear anger and disenchantment reminiscent of his frustration with the film industry in Iran.

The reality of life today in the Federal Republic of Germany is increasingly not to be found in our films. The excuse offered is that this won't make any money. It has no economic potential. Culture is culture and business is business! Didn't you know that?...All those young people running around without a job and turning to drugs and alcohol. All those separated women living alone with their children. Children who instead of a father often



get to know five uncles, one after the other. Aren't those worthy topics? In a democratic system like that of the Federal Republic one would think that criticism should be allowed. That one might be able to tell somber stories based on the facts. The public is always willing to listen. It's interested in learning something about the society in which it lives.<sup>13</sup>

The image of Saless that emerges most strongly from the quotes above therefore is that of a socially conscious director, frustrated by the difficulties in making films that explore the everyday problems of the marginalised and forgotten people in society at large. It is this frustration, more than a recalcitrant self-pity or bitterness at his own exile, which seems to have motivated Saless, influenced his directorial style, and informed the melancholy, inherently undramatic and subdued nature of many of his films.

My understanding of Saless's representation of the everyday is most heavily indebted to Andrew Klevan's theorisation of the everyday in narrative film as a process of undramatic disclosure. Basing his argument upon the claim that most narrative films are "in an overtly dramatic, melodramatic or comic idiom...tapping the visually expressive potentialities of the art and satisfying the needs of the audience", Klevan examines how some films "organise their narratives around a range of life experiences unavailable to the melodramatic mode as it has developed in world cinema"; namely, "life experiences based around the routine or repetitive, the apparently banal or mundane, and the uneventful".<sup>14</sup> Among the four films Klevan analyses in depth – *Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1950, France), *Loves of a Blonde* (Milos Forman, 1965, Czechoslovakia), *Late Spring* (Ozu Yasujiro, 1949, Japan) and *A Tale of Springtime* (Eric Rohmer, 1990, France) – he identifies a variety of stylistic and performative narrational techniques, ranging from subtle camera movement, positioning and framing, to body language and the repetition of simple yet significant gestures performed by the actors on screen, such as the bowing of a character's head, or a particular way of sitting. These techniques, asserts Klevan, reveal a preference for more restrained and understated modes of narration, which stand in contrast to more traditionally expressive and dramatic forms of storytelling in cinema. Such different modes of narration, explains Klevan, referring specifically to a scene from *Loves of a Blonde*, require the viewer to reposition themselves in relation to the film's more indirect means of revealing information:

Viewers need to redirect their interest, therefore, from the possible suspense provided by plot questions, and instead reorientate themselves to the scene's [or film's] alternative form of organisation. They should become attuned to its pattern of prevarications.<sup>15</sup>

Kleван therefore does not pretend to offer a definitive concept of the 'everyday' as much as he aims to illustrate how complex emotional states and seemingly commonplace and repetitive daily events and actions can be portrayed in film in an essentially undramatic yet meaningful manner. Indeed, the word 'disclosure' itself implies a more discreet method of narration, one that is more concerned with gradually *divulging information* and encouraging attentiveness to small details than it is with *telling a story* as such by means of significant plot revelations and clear-cut character motivation. Amir Naderi for instance, has described some of his own pre-revolutionary Iranian films, which share many similarities with those of Saless, as examples of "anti-plot" or "anti-story" filmmaking.<sup>16</sup> As Kleван explains however, a lack of narrative drive and psychological transparency does not necessarily equate to an indifference to, or disavowal of, plot and character development altogether:

The presence of clear continuity...prevents us from bracketing them as non-narrative films, or from categorising them as not interested in narrating any story at all...The respecting of spatial and temporal continuity, but not causal or teleological integration, encourages one to conclude that nothing is happening, or that matters are not developing apace. This, however, is to overlook the "more complete visual field", which is an integral part of film's narration, to miss the broader sense in which films are narrated and to need more urgently than ever to be oriented to the "oblique strands of narrational strategy".<sup>17</sup>

These "oblique strands of narrational strategy" are better appreciated, continues Kleван, by closer attention to a film's "narrative patterning"; the way in which banal, everyday events and acts are shown repeatedly, with "slight, but crucial, variations".<sup>18</sup> For example, there are two scenes in Saless's first feature-length film *A Simple Event* (1973, Iran), involving the film's central character, a young boy (played by Mohammed Zamani), which I find particularly moving. In the first scene, the boy arrives home, and after closing the door behind him, looks down at an empty mattress lying on the floor (fig. 1), where his recently deceased mother used to sleep. In a later scene, also set in his home, he eats a makeshift dinner of bread and a soft drink (fig. 2). I find these scenes moving however, only in the context of several other scenes already witnessed earlier in the film, which show the boy arriving home – either from school or from helping his father in his illegal fishing activities – and tending to his sick mother, or eating a hot meal

prepared for him by his mother as he sits perched on the window ledge, in contrast to the aforementioned scene where he eats by himself, standing up rather than sitting down. The images of the boy eating alone thus reveal his sense of loss and solitude, while an everyday



Figure 1



Figure 2

object such as a mattress is imbued with meaning, acting as a reminder of the mother's absent presence. Indeed, Saeed-Vafa notes how the repetition of the simple act of eating reflects the boy's changing emotional state throughout the film.

A similar strategy is employed in Saless's second Iranian film *Still Life* and his first wholly German film *A Time of Maturity*.<sup>19</sup> On the first two occasions when the railway worker (Z. Bonyadi) and his wife (H. Safarian) are shown sharing a meal together in *Still Life* – in the second instance with their son also – their reticence and unhurried manner of eating suggests a familiarity with and ease in each other's company. On the third occasion however, the act of eating reveals the insolence and disrespectful nature of the young railway worker who is sent to replace the husband when he is forcibly retired. As the young man greedily wolfs down the food prepared for him, the wife looks on silently, a look of what appears to be quiet but palpable disdain on her face. Likewise, in *A Time of Maturity*, the recurrence of scenes which show the young boy Michael (Mike Henning) eating alone (fig. 3) – the first time at breakfast, as he tiptoes quietly about his mother's apartment so as not to wake her as she sleeps; the second time at dinner, as he sits by himself as his mother (Eva Manhardt) puts on her make-up before going out to work as a prostitute; and the next two occasions at supper, as he eats alone while his mother



is out working – reveals gradually, rather than emphasising or reiterating unnecessarily, his growing isolation.

Repetition is a narrative device found in all of Saless's films, in Paul's incessant drinking in *Roses for Africa*, in Herbert's increasingly enervating trips to the supermarket in *Ordnung/Order* (1980, West Germany), in the anti-Semitic notes Hans receives, and in Michael's painting of his flat in *Diary of a Lover* (the same Michael that appears in *A Time of Maturity*, now an adult, *Diary of a Lover* being a kind of follow-up to the earlier film).<sup>20</sup> As Saeed-Vafa remarks, repetition in Saless's films "goes beyond serving the idea of the passage of time and routine or even a philosophical statement about life. It also provides a reference for us to measure and notice the shifts in the characters' emotions and their inner trauma."<sup>21</sup>

The notion of the repetition of everyday routines – and the variations within those routines – providing a reference for the viewer to notice otherwise hidden or imperceptible changes in the characters' emotions is displayed most powerfully in *A Time of Maturity*, in the mother's daily removal of her make-up when she arrives home from work every night. This routine is depicted on three separate occasions throughout the film, each time with barely noticeable but significant differences, with "slight, but crucial variations". Indeed the layout of images from these three sequences on pages 177-79 is intended to show how the repetition of certain actions by the



Figure 3

characters, and of certain shots and camera angles across these three sequences, enables the viewer to recognise them as following largely the same order overall, albeit in more abbreviated or extended forms; as the same but different. The sequences also reveal Saless's reliance on the viewer's ability to notice the

variations between the three sequences, at certain points inviting the viewer – once again, as the layout of images hopefully demonstrates – to literally fill in the blanks so to speak.

The viewer therefore is introduced to this routine in the opening scene of the film, which is around ten minutes in length. The opening long shot shows a darkened room, with some light shining in through a window in the centre of the screen (fig. 1.1). There is no movement for over two minutes as the opening credits roll, with the only audible noise being a clock ticking away in the background. Eventually the silhouette of a young boy is visible moving past the window (fig. 1.2), and a light flicks on off-screen, shedding some light on the room and revealing a bed and some crumpled sheets in the corner. A cut shows the boy getting himself a drink of water from the tap in the kitchen (fig. 1.3), before returning to the preceding long shot of the room (as seen in fig. 1.1). The boy enters the screen to go back to bed, pausing midway and returning to the kitchen to turn off the light before doing so. There is another lengthy pause of around forty seconds or so, before there is the noise of a lock being turned. A cut to the front door shows the mother entering the apartment (fig. 1.4), the light from the landing outside allowing the viewer a brief glimpse of her figure and her clothes – and it is heavily implied that she is a sex worker by her manner of dress and the time at which she arrives home – before once again returning to the long shot of the darkened room. Entering screen right, her outline moves faintly across the room and past the window, where she turns on a light above her make-up table (fig. 1.5), revealing a drab and sparsely decorated apartment. Sitting down in front of a mirror – the camera looking over her shoulder so we can see her reflection in the mirror (fig. 1.6) – she proceeds quite laboriously to remove her necklace, her blouse, her shoes, her earrings, her jewellery – and in a close-up of her reflection (fig. 1.8) – her lipstick and her fake eyelashes, wiping her face clean before getting up and going into the kitchen. This process, intercut with a few shots of her son lying in bed (fig. 1.7), takes around three and half minutes to complete. The unchanging and impassive expression on her face, as well as the habitual nature of her movements indicates the extent to which this daily ritual is a matter of routine for her. In the kitchen, her dual status as loving mother and sex object is touchingly combined as, in her underwear, she makes a sandwich for her son's school lunch the next day (fig. 1.9), which she leaves for him on a table with some change from her purse (fig. 1.10). She then smokes a cigarette in bed before finally going to sleep (fig. 1.11).



Sequence 1Sequence 2Sequence 3

Figure 3.1

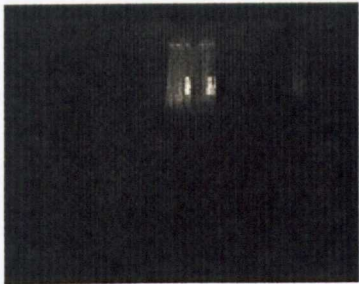


Figure 1.1

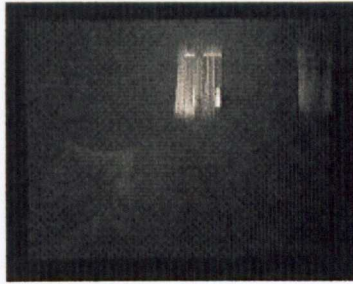


Figure 2.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 1.2



Figure 2.2



Figure 3.3



Figure 1.3



Figure 1.4



Figure 2.3



Figure 3.4



Figure 1.5



Figure 2.4



Figure 3.5

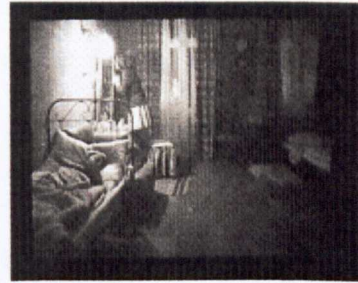


Figure 3.6



Figure 3.7



Figure 1.6



Figure 2.5



Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9





Figure 1.7



Figure 2.6



Figure 3.10



Figure 1.8



Figure 3.11



Figure 1.9



Figure 2.7



Figure 1.10



Figure 2.8



Figure 1.11



Figure 2.9

Some forty minutes later into the film, the viewer is again shown this routine, but on this occasion with some notable ellipses. The sequence begins once more with the same static long shot of the darkened room (fig. 2.1). This time however there follows only one relatively brief shot of Michael lying in bed asleep (fig. 2.2), before there is a cut to his mother entering the apartment through the front door, wearing an outfit similar to the one she wore earlier (fig. 2.3). When she crosses the room and switches on the light above her make-up table (fig. 2.4), the camera initially maintains a distance as she begins to remove her make-up, before cutting to the over-the-shoulder shot of her reflection in the mirror (fig. 2.5). She removes her make-up in exactly the same manner and in much the same order as before, this time keeping her blouse on however. As expected, there is a cut to her son lying in bed (fig. 2.6). Instead of returning to her reflection in the mirror however, there follows a shot of her making another sandwich in the kitchen (fig. 2.7). A lengthy close-up of the sandwich lying on the table also replaces the earlier shot of the mother moving about the apartment, taking some money out of her purse, and laying it on the table beside the sandwich. On this occasion, her hand simply enters the close-up to throw some money on the table (fig. 2.8), before the sequence ends, as before, with a shot of her smoking a cigarette in bed (fig. 2.9). In comparison with the opening sequence, this sequence lasts only roughly three and half minutes. As suggested above however, the repetition of certain actions by the mother (opening the front door, switching on the light, removing her make-up, making the sandwich, laying the money from her purse on the table, and smoking her cigarette), and of certain shots and camera angles (figs. 1.1 and 2.1, 1.4 and 2.3, 1.5 and 2.4, 1.6 and 2.5, 1.7 and 2.6, 1.10 and 2.8, and finally 1.11 and 2.9) allows the viewer to recognise the second sequence as recollective of the first, as adhering broadly to the pattern established in the opening scene, but to also discern the slight ellipses that occur. The viewer may regard the repetition of these events as self-indulgent or pointless, and the time devoted to them as disproportionate to the amount narrative information or character development they relate. The repetition of these events however, and the ellipses that curtail their duration, call upon the viewer to remember the events that they witnessed in their entirety in the first sequence, engraining within the viewer at an (un)conscious level it would seem, the mother's routine and the series of actions and images that comprise it, setting up a number of expectations for what will ensue in the third sequence.

On the third occasion that this routine is shown however, a noticeable change in the mother's behaviour reveals her pain and distress, while a similar deviation from the established pattern of shots and camera angles used to depict this routine serves to undercut the potentially dramatic effects of such a shift. Or as Ivone Margulies might put it, Saless – like Chantal Akerman in *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975, Belgium/France), a film which *A Time of Maturity* appears to resemble remarkably (like *Jeanne Dielman* from the child's point-of-view, minus the murder scene) – establishes "a formal and a behavioural paradigm only the better to expose its underside".<sup>22</sup> The sequence begins slightly differently this time, opening with a shot of Michael lying in bed awake (fig. 3.1), seemingly waiting for his mother to arrive home. There is a cut to the familiar long shot of the darkened room (fig. 3.2), before returning to the previous shot of Michael, who closes his eyes and pretends to be asleep (fig. 3.3) when he hears the key turning in the lock on the front door. His mother then enters the apartment (fig. 3.4), crosses the room and switches on the light as before (fig. 3.5). On this occasion however she pauses briefly to inspect her face in the mirror before sitting down (fig. 3.6). A shot of Michael opening his eyes and listening to his mother surreptitiously (fig. 3.7) precedes the familiar over-the-shoulder shot of his mother's reflection in the mirror. This time however she does not begin to remove her clothes or her make-up, but instead leans into the mirror slightly, examining her face and gently touching what appears to be a bruise near her mouth, though it is barely perceptible to the viewer (fig. 3.8). Visibly upset, she then hangs her head and begins to cry (fig. 3.9). Her grief is all the more unexpected and striking given her previous lack of emotion, and would not be as effective had the time not already been taken to establish her usual impassivity as commonplace and invariable. It is also significant that, in contrast to the previous sequences in the film, the viewer's point-of-view on this occasion is subtly yet clearly aligned with that of Michael's, from the opening shot (fig. 3.1) onwards. As the sequence begins the viewer waits with him for his mother to arrive home, is privy to his pretence to be asleep, and shares his concern when he hears his mother crying. As soon as this disturbance occurs however, the scene just as suddenly concludes. There follows one more shot of Michael in bed ((fig. 3.10) there is a look of concern on his face, but he does not make a sound) before the camera reverts to the previous long shot of the room (fig. 3.11) and instead of lingering on the scene, gradually fades out to black.



Given the extent to which *A Time of Maturity* depends upon repetition, and the way in which it emphasises temporality – that is, the sheer length of time it takes for events to unfold on screen, as well as the differences in duration it accords to these (repeated) events – there are clear comparisons to be made here between Saless's films and the structural/materialist practices of much European and North American avant-garde filmmaking (the parallel with Chantal Akerman for instance has already been noted). Like much so-called structural/materialist filmmaking, Saless's films encourage an active spectator, inviting the viewer to recognise and contemplate the repetition of certain scenes, events, objects and shots, and to notice the slight deviations (or "prevarications" perhaps) from these established patterns. There are tensions however between the kind of viewing experience Saless's films offer and what Stephen Heath identifies, firstly, as the effect of repetition in structural/materialist film, which is to break or problematise straightforward viewer identification (although Heath acknowledges that *all* films solicit primary identification with the image even if they lack the potential for secondary identification provided by particular characters within the world of the film); and secondly, the intention of structural/materialist filmmaking overall, which is to produce a sense of disunity in the viewer, often by self-reflexive means (and thereby disrupting the potential for complete, unchecked ego-investment offered by unmediated primary identification with the image). As Heath argues, in contrast to traditional narrative cinema, which typically offers the viewer a more or less fixed, stable position of subjectivity, the practices of structural/materialist filmmaking address

not a spectator as a unified subject, timed by narrative action, making the relations the film makes to be made, coming in the pleasure of the mastery of those relations, of the positioned view they offer, but a spectator, a spectating activity, at the limit of any fixed subjectivity, materially inconstant, dispersed in process, beyond the accommodation of reality and pleasure principles. 'Boredom' is a word which is sometimes assumed by the film-makers with regard to their films, the boredom which is the loss of the imaginary unity of the subject-ego and the very grain of drive against that coherent fiction...<sup>23</sup>

Despite their often painstakingly slow and methodical pace however, Saless's fiction films have clearly discernible and easily understandable narratives. Moreover, unlike many structural/materialist films, Saless's films always feature at least one central character (indeed in a film like *Utopia* (1983, West Germany) several central characters) with whom the viewer can identify, even if this identification is strategically problematised, as much by those characters'

passivity and lack of narrative agency as it is by the seemingly redundant repetition of narrative information, as will become evident in the following analysis of *Hans – A Boy in Germany*.

Furthermore, besides the repetition of certain authorial signatures, such as the use of long takes and long shots, which may serve to remind the informed viewer that they are watching a Saleess film, Saleess never seeks to break down the unity or reveal the constructedness of the diegetic world he portrays on screen. As Olaf Moller observes, Saleess would more than likely have regarded such self-reflexive devices as "a con game, diversion, or excuse", a distraction from the social 'realism' his films strive for. Indeed, it is this filmmaking ethic that perhaps most clearly distinguishes Saleess from the self-reflexive practices of contemporary Iranian filmmakers such as Kiarostami, Panahi and the Makhmalbafs.

Ultimately Saleess's films exist somewhere in between the experimental practices of structural/materialist filmmaking and those of traditional narrative cinema. Rather, continues Moller, Saleess's films set out to "confront the viewer with a hard, precisely aimed slap."<sup>24</sup> By "slap" Moller means the way in which Saleess carefully structures his portrayals of the everyday so as to shock the viewer, rather than alienate them, when an especially traumatic or significant event disrupts his characters' daily lives.

The closing moments *A Time of Maturity* are once again a good illustration of this 'shock affect' strategy. The scene in question shows Michael arriving home early from school one day to see his mother performing fellatio on one of her clients in the reflection in the mirror, and begins with a long shot of Michael entering the apartment through the front door, the camera positioned at the opposite end of the room so that the mother's bed is hidden from view. Just as Michael has finished closing the door and hanging his key up on the wall (fig. 4), there is sudden cut (almost a jump-cut) to a medium close-up of the mirror, and the reflection of his mother giving oral sex to one of her clients (fig. 5). The cut appears sudden because up until this point in the film, the viewer has been accustomed to watching the characters perform nearly all of their daily tasks in their entirety, usually in protracted, uninterrupted long takes. The cut away from Michael therefore, slight as it may seem, appears abrupt because it occurs unexpectedly in mid-action, and violent because it momentarily tears the viewer's point-of-view away from that of Michael's. Because the viewer sees Michael's mother giving oral sex before Michael himself actually sees it,



Figure 4



Figure 5

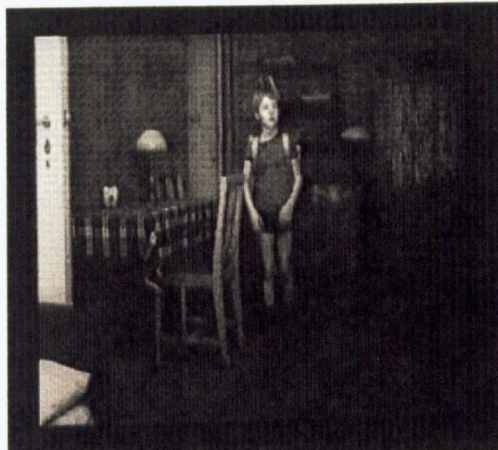


Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

the shot is thus made more shocking than it might otherwise have seemed, had it been revealed for instance by a slight camera movement, or motivated causally by a shot of Michael gazing off-screen at something, as the next shot shows him doing (fig. 6), transfixed to the spot upon seeing the reflection in the mirror, and seemingly hidden from his mother's view by the kitchen door. This shot in itself is somewhat disconcerting, because for the first time in the film there appears to be a minor yet noticeable breakdown in spatial continuity. Firstly, Michael does not occupy the same position that he did prior to the shot of his mother's reflection in the mirror, for he has clearly moved from the background into the middle ground of the shot. Furthermore, a cut back to the reflection in the mirror and a slight zoom in seems to confirm it as a point-of-view shot from Michael's perspective (fig. 7), which seems impossible and illogical given the order of shots so far. Or does Michael himself assume this perspective after the viewer/camera has already done so? However the viewer may choose to interpret it, it seems clear that the shock of Michael's discovery is complemented and intensified by a similar disorientation in the spatial organisation of the scene itself.

Michael's muted reaction to the sight of his mother performing oral sex also seems incongruous with the presumably traumatic consequences of his discovery. He does not express anger, grief or sorrow. Instead, removing his schoolbag slowly from over his shoulder and laying it quietly on the floor next to the table (fig. 8), keeping his eyes fixed firmly on the reflection in the mirror, he merely turns around, silently exits the apartment – looking back one more time before leaving (fig. 9) – and goes down the flights of stairs to the lobby on the ground floor. As he sits and waits for the client to leave, the film ends. Although the scene provides a climax of sorts to the narrative, the conclusion of the film itself is very subdued and open-ended. There is no emotional confrontation between Michael and his mother, and Michael's feelings at his discovery remain undivulged, the blank expression on his face rendering them incomprehensible. Indeed, Saless does not go on to explore the traumatic effects of the event upon Michael until his subsequent film *Diary of a Lover*, which contains an equally shocking conclusion, when in the film's penultimate scene, the dead body of Michael's lover Monika is discovered under his bed by police officers searching his apartment, a discovery that is portrayed once again with typical self-

restraint and nonchalance by Saless. (The closing image of the film itself is of Michael wearing a straitjacket, imprisoned in an asylum).

Saless's thoroughly unemotional and undramatic manner of depicting these shocking events is often unnerving, because stylistically it accords the events themselves an equivalence with the other mundane and unexceptional incidents which comprise the characters' everyday routines, an equivalence that is at odds with their unexpectedness and their frequently traumatic effects. In this respect Saless's strategy once again seems to bear a striking similarity to the strategy Margulies identifies at work in Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, where a process of "diegetic indifferentiation" between the scenes of housework and the scenes of prostitution neutralises the importance – in the "hierarchy of spectacle" – of the "fictive obscenity" of the latter scenes, "revealing a complicity between narrative procedures and narrated acts and gestures".<sup>25</sup>

Such a strategy can also be seen at work in *The Willow Tree*, the film that perhaps most expertly demonstrates Saless's meticulous attention to the construction of the 'everyday', and his method of shocking the viewer by dramatically undercutting those events that disrupt the daily order of things. Indeed the opening twenty minutes of film appear in many respects to be a microcosm of every film Saless ever made, the culmination of his filmmaking career, displaying all the hallmarks of his directorial style. In *The Willow Tree*, not one take seems overlong or drawn out, not one shot misplaced. The shocking event in this instance – a murder – is all the more startling for this precision when it occurs.

The film begins with the miller Arkhip (Josef Stehlik), sitting on the small jetty that juts out into the lake next to his mill, fishing with a makeshift rod made from a stick and a piece of line, in a quite idyllic pastoral setting. The opening shot – a slight zoom in on Arkhip's inverted reflection, undulating on the surface of the lake (fig. 4.1) – is the first of a number of images hinting at the old man's transience. A close-up of Arkhip's bearded, aged face shows him reaching out to grab hold of the line (fig. 4.2), a brief shot of a small fish being pulled out of the water preceding a long shot of Arkhip unhooking the fish, putting it in a bucket behind him, and throwing the line back into the water. There follows an extreme long shot of Arkhip's mill, a large willow tree standing beside it. A horse-drawn coach appears on top of the horizon behind the mill (fig. 4.3), its arrival also





Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6



Figure 4.7



Figure 4.8



Figure 4.9



Figure 4.10



Figure 4.11



Figure 4.12



Figure 4.13



Figure 4.14



Figure 4.15



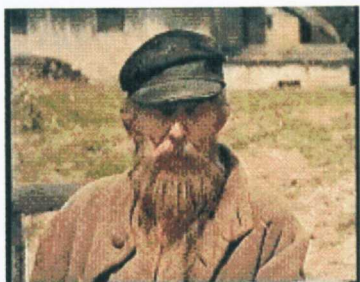


Figure 4.16



Figure 4.17



Figure 4.18



Figure 4.19



Figure 4.20



Fig 4.21



Figure 4.22



Figure 4.23



Figure 4.24



Figure 4.25



Figure 4.26



Figure 4.27

announced by the chiming of the bells attached to the collars around the necks of the horses.

A rear long shot of Arkhip perched on the edge of the jetty shows the old man looking off-screen to his right over his shoulder (fig. 4.4) at the coach descending the path next to the mill. Another extreme long shot of the mill, repositioned slightly so as to include Arkhip sitting on the jetty, then shows the coach moving along the path as it moves rapidly past the mill (fig. 4.5), eventually disappearing off the right-hand side of the screen. A cut to a panning shot of the coach

– a closer long shot which shows two men aboard – follows it as it travels quickly along the path running alongside the edge of the lake and into the distance (fig. 4.6). A considerably slower panning shot then shows Arkhip getting to his feet, picking up his bucket and hobbling slowly towards his mill as the opening titles of the film roll.

The first interior shot of the film (fig. 4.7) shows Arkhip entering the mill, putting his bucket on the floor and moving over to the stove, before fading to black. The fade to black – less immediate than a cut – suggests the slow passage of time and adds to the sense of Arkhip's life unfolding at a leisurely, unhurried pace, a mood that has already been generated by the use of long takes and the slow movements of Arkhip himself. The two subsequent shots of Arkhip that follow – both long shots in terms of distance *and* duration – conclude with fade-outs also, and show him preparing food on the stove and eating the food (fig. 4.8) he has just prepared whilst sitting on his bed respectively. The colour scheme of the mill itself is one of resounding greyness, matching the shade of Arkhip's faded and ragged clothes. His slow and frail movements, the drabness and lifelessness of the interior of his house and his clothing, and the shots of him fishing, preparing his meal and eating alone, all point toward the repetitive, rhythmical and solitary nature of his existence.

It is unclear whether or not the first shot of the ensuing sequence – a long shot of Arkhip once again fishing on the jetty (fig. 4.9) – occurs on the same day, the following day, or at a later point in time. The chiming of bells that emerges on the soundtrack however, anticipates the impending reappearance of the coach, and acts as a segue into the panning shot of the coach that follows (fig. 4.10), as it once again follows the path that runs past the mill and alongside the lake. It is virtually identical to the panning shot from the first sequence (fig. 4.6), the only difference being that on this occasion the shot concludes with a fade-out, rather than another cut to Arkhip on the jetty.

An extreme long shot of Arkhip's mill follows the fade-out from the panning shot, the smoke emerging from the chimney suggesting that perhaps Arkhip is once again preparing a meal. Another long shot of Arkhip sitting on his bed and eating his food follows (fig. 4.11), the sound of a fly buzzing around him as he eats confirming his utter loneliness and isolation. A close-up of Arkhip's wizened face as he eats (fig. 4.12) precedes a fade out to black, the

sequence itself concluding with another combination of a long shot and a close-up, this time of Arkhip asleep in bed (figs. 4.13 and 4.14). It is now nighttime, and the sound of crickets chirping is clearly audible in the background. Similar to the second time the viewer witnesses the mother removing her make-up in *A Time of Maturity* therefore, the second sequence in *The Willow Tree* effectively condenses the events of the opening sequence into the space of three minutes and a mere seven shots.

Four shots precede the appearance of the coach in the third sequence; an establishing shot of Arkhip's mill (fig. 4.15), similar to the previous shots of the mill in the first two sequences; a medium close-up of Arkhip sitting on the jetty (fig. 4.16), the sunlight reflected off the surface of the lake shimmering over his immobile face; a shot of the float on his fishing line bobbing on the surface of the water; and a long shot of Arkhip perched on the edge of the jetty (fig. 4.17), the sound of bells chiming in the distance once more anticipating a cut to an extreme long shot of the coach emerging over the horizon next to Arkhip's mill (fig. 4.18). The coach is moving noticeably slower this time however, the horses trotting rather than galloping as they were before, the bells also chiming less rapidly as a result. These slight changes – in the movement of the coach and the chiming of the bells – alert the viewer to the differences between the arrival of the coach on this occasion and its two previous appearances in the film thus far. Moreover, only one man is visible driving the coach this time as it moves from the background into the middle ground of the shot, and comes to a stop in front of Arkhip's mill (fig. 4.19). A shot of Arkhip looking back over his shoulder at the cart precedes the very first close-up of the driver (Peter Stanik) as he looks about him suspiciously, as if to make sure no one is around (fig. 4.20). He eventually steps down from his seat and moves round to the rear of the cart – failing to notice Arkhip sitting on the jetty, looking on silently – and climbs on board, revealing the other coachman to be asleep in the back of the cart, as the driver looms over him in a rear-medium shot (fig. 4.21). Then the murder occurs.

A medium-shot of the driver shows him looking down at the other coachman off-screen (fig. 4.22), followed by a close-up of the coachman as he sleeps unsuspectingly (fig. 4.23), before returning to the rear medium-shot of the driver, who looks around one more time as he reaches down off-screen to his right to pick up a mace (fig. 4.24), which he then bashes over the sleeping

coachman's head four times. The first blow is represented in a medium-shot of the driver as swings the mace and brings it crashing down on the sleeping coachman's head off-screen (fig. 4.25), followed by another close-up of the coachman similar to fig. 4.23, a trail of blood on his forehead and the right side of his face. A rear medium long shot of the driver and the coach shows the second blow, and the head of the mace clearly connecting with the coachman's skull, with a sickening, dull thudding noise (fig. 4.26). The final two blows are shown from a distance, in a side-on extreme long shot of the coach (fig. 4.27).

Like Michael's reaction to his discovery of his mother's prostitution in *A Time of Maturity*, Arkhip's reaction to the murder scene in *The Willow Tree* is quiet and understated. He merely waits for the driver to leave, before taking the bagful of money the driver hides in the trunk of the willow tree next to his mill to the local authorities (only to have the local authorities gradually pilfer all the money for themselves). Rather than merely serving to render the murder all the more shocking by underplaying its dramatic impact however, the stark and unemotional depiction of the murder in *The Willow Tree* also mirrors the alarming brutality and coldness of its execution. Saless's use of sound is especially important in this respect, and illustrates his preference for natural sounds rather than music in his films. The dull thud of the mace connecting with the coachman's skull for instance is particularly jolting on a soundtrack which up until the murder scene has been almost entirely composed of sounds of nature, such as birds singing, crickets chirping, and flies buzzing. The *unnatural* clubbing noise of the mace, and even the slight clinking of its chain as the driver handles it, insignificant as they may seem, are therefore integral to the scene's disconcerting and visceral quality. Moreover, in such an apparently prelapsarian setting as the woodland surrounding Arkhip's mill, the murder itself seems to take on an almost mythical, primeval resonance. The only other scene in Saless's oeuvre with which the murder scene in *The Willow Tree* seems comparable is the prostitutes' collective killing of their pimp at the conclusion of *Utopia*, a murder that is perhaps equally shocking in its casual violence and restrained portrayal.

It is significant however that one of the most violent moments of Chekhov's short story is completely elided from Saless's film adaptation. When the coachman returns to the scene of his crime to retrieve his bag of money, only to discover it is gone, he attacks Arkhip:



The driver sprang to his feet gave a roar, and threw himself on Arkhip. He beat him and beat him. He beat his old face unmercifully, then threw him down on the ground and stamped on him. When he had finished beating the old man, he did not go away but stayed on at the mill and lived there with Arkhip.<sup>26</sup>

The driver does certainly stay on and live with Arkhip at the end of Saless's film, but the savage beating is omitted, perhaps because, somewhat ironically, Saless found it far too dramatic an event to try to portray. The driver instead turns up one day out of nowhere like a ghost, seemingly haunted by the crime he has committed.

For all of Saless's subtlety however, there is arguably an occasional heavy-handedness to his directorial style, a stubbornness in his refusal to allow the viewer to identify or empathise straightforwardly or unproblematically with his characters, by means of none-too-subtle distancing strategies, which seems incompatible with Klevan's notion of the everyday in narrative film as a process that avoids assertion or overemphasis. The mother's death scene in *A Simple Event* is a prime example of this heavy-handedness, and illustrates Saless's uncompromisingly unemotional and detached way of portraying sometimes the most harrowing of events (as does the title of the film itself). The scene is comprised almost entirely of one long, uninterrupted take – a long shot of the one room that forms the house that the boy and his mother and father live in (fig. 10).



Figure 10

The boy has been sent by his father to fetch a doctor to examine his sick mother. The boy and the doctor enter the room through the door on the left-hand side of the screen, the camera panning slightly to follow the doctor as he moves past the mother – who lays motionless on a mattress on the floor in the background – and rests his medical bag on a table on the other side of the room. Taking a stethoscope out of his bag, he then goes over to the mother, moving into the background of the shot himself to examine her. During the examination he does not utter a word and keeps his back to the camera, obscuring the camera's view of the mother also. The shot itself is composed so that the doctor and the mother occupy mainly the centre of the screen, though they are slightly off centre to the left-hand side. The boy and the father stand to the left and the right of them respectively, looking on, and stay completely still and silent during the examination. Indeed what is perhaps most noticeable during the scene, besides the sheer length and stillness of the take itself, is the obtrusive noise of a dog barking continually in the background, in the absence of music or any other noise on the soundtrack whatsoever. The two medium close-ups of the boy that briefly break up the take do nothing in themselves to heighten the emotional tone of the scene. The first close-up (fig. 11) shows the boy leaning forward and peering off-screen to his right, mirroring the viewer's desire to get a closer look at the doctor examining his mother. There follows no point-of-view shot however, even though the boy's off-screen gaze could easily motivate one. The second close-up occurs when the doctor stands up and coolly pronounces the mother dead before packing his medical bag and leaving the house. The boy shows no visible signs of emotion however, and does not begin to cry, but instead

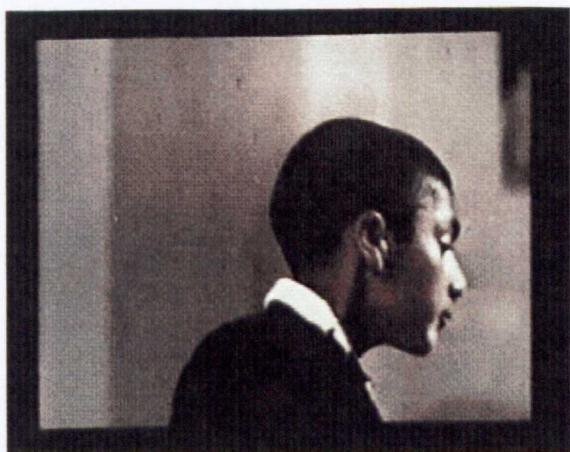


Figure 11

merely bows his head, as if he were accepting his mother's death as a simple fact of life.

When the doctor leaves, the boy and his father remain still and do not speak to each other.

The father appears to begin to weep as he raises his hand to his face and leans against the wall of the house. But his physical distance



from the camera obscures and minimises the emotional impact of the gesture. Indeed, the stillness and silence of the actors on screen, the minimalist soundtrack, and the camera framing and positioning all work together – as suggested, perhaps somewhat forcefully – to frustrate the viewer's possible emotional involvement in the scene. At two and a half minutes in length, the take itself is absolutely unrelenting in its fixity and its detachment from the plight of the characters on screen.

On the other hand, a similar technique is used to considerable yet subtle emotive effect in *A Time of Maturity*, when Michael's mother breaks down in tears in front of the mirror. As mentioned previously, as soon as the mother begins to cry, there is a cut to the familiar long shot of the room (fig 3.11 above). In one sense the cut clearly distances the viewer from the mother as she cries, undercutting the emotional impact of the scene as opposed to heightening it, as a well-timed close-up of the mother's face as she weeps might have done. Nevertheless, the cut to a long shot and the subsequent fade to black paradoxically renders the scene all the more moving, as it indicates a sensitivity towards the mother's distress, a reluctance to exploit or dwell voyeuristically upon her moment of anguish. Or to put it another way, the camera – and hence the viewer – seem to show a deference to her suffering by physically extricating themselves from the scene. The same argument could indeed also be applied to the mother's death scene in *A Simple Event*, which also fades to black relatively quickly after the doctor pronounces the mother dead.

The ambiguities surrounding Saless's portrayal of everyday manifest themselves most powerfully in *Hans – A Boy in Germany*, particularly around the portrayal of the film's main character, played by Martin Pasko. The film, an adaptation of Hans Frick's novel *The Blue Hour*, which is largely autobiographical in content, tells the tale of a half-Jewish boy living in Nazi Germany with his mother and grandmother. His father, a Hungarian Jew, fled Germany before the outbreak of war. In his portrayal of the everyday racism rife in German society during the Nazi era, Saless creates a darkly cynical critique of how that racism carries over into post-war German society.

### Hans – A Film From Germany?

That the title of *Hans – A Boy in Germany* is evocative of Hans Jürgen Syberberg's epic *Hitler – ein Film aus Deutschland/Hitler – A Film From Germany* (1978, West Germany/UK/France) seems particularly apt, Saless's film providing as it does a characteristically less grandiose, though in some respects equally ambitious counterpoint of sorts, to Syberberg's sweeping account of World War II and the Holocaust as the omega point of German (and by extension, European) civilization. In *Stranded Objects*, his insightful examination of mourning in postwar West German cinema, Eric L. Santner argues that Syberberg's vision of history as a "single apocalyptic *grand récit*",<sup>27</sup> implies less of a concern with initiating a "labour of mourning than a reinscription of grandiose refusals to mourn: quests for a regressive return to origins, and ultimately for oblivion", a strategy "more akin to an exorcism than to the labour of mourning".<sup>28</sup> (This is despite Syberberg's impressive examination of "the gears of the most powerful politico-cinematic machinery ever known".)<sup>29</sup> Saless's portrayal of the 'everyday' also clearly differs from Edgar Reitz's understanding of the concept of 'everyday history', or *alltagsgeschichte*, a term originally coined by German historian Martin Broszat, and envisioned in Reitz's monumental film *Heimat – eine Deutsche Chronik/Heimat – a German Chronicle* (1984, West Germany, and over fifteen hours in length). As Santner notes, Reitz's portrayal of daily life in the idyllic village of Schabbach – which is irrevocably altered by the encroaching forces of modernity, fascism, and ultimately, Americanisation – essentialises a way of life that probably never existed in the first place, betraying a melancholic regret for the destruction of an allegedly 'authentic' German way of life, rather than marking the beginning of a long overdue process of mourning or *Trauerarbeit*. As the German historian Omer Bartov has remarked, "*Heimat* is a film not about memory but about amnesia, that is, about the absence of memory and all that can be remembered and must nevertheless be erased."<sup>30</sup>

If Syberberg and Reitz, whose films Santner describes as "the two most ambitious attempts by recent German artists to create works of national elegiac art", are both responsible for an abstraction and romanticisation of German history, Saless by contrast exposes the underside of German society during the Nazi era, focusing on the sinisterly casual, everyday

racism endemic to Germany during that time, and how that racism lingers on in German society long after the end of the war. Indeed, if *Heimat* and *Hitler – A Film From Germany* are both in their own ways films about amnesia, about the need to rewrite history, then *Hans – A Boy in Germany* is a film about the inability to forget or change the past, and the way in which the past returns to haunt the lives of Hans and his family, particularly his mother Eva (Imke Barnstedt). As Eva remarks, when her son returns home following the end of the war – after fleeing one day upon discovering men dressed like Gestapo agents knocking on the front door – to discover his grandmother Oma (Yane Bittlova) has died during his absence: "Perhaps today we will forget." Troubled by nightmares however, and growing ever more paranoid, Eva is unable to forget the cruelty of her neighbours, who continue to slip anti-Semitic notes under her front door calling her a Jewish whore, despite Hans' attempts to hide the notes from her. Just like her mother Oma, who wishes to die and is confined to her bed for most of the film, Eva's helplessness to overcome the past transforms into a desire for oblivion. The final image of Eva in the film, bed-ridden and catatonic, illustrates vividly that she is slowly suffering the same fate as her mother before her. Moreover, Eva and Oma's desire for oblivion is matched by the desire on the part of their racist neighbours for another kind of oblivion; namely to banish the last trace, the last rem(a)inder of Jewish existence from their midst. It is indeed telling that Hans finds the single-word imperative "Verschwinde!" or "Disappear!" scribbled on one of the notes he discovers slipped under the front door one day (it is the anti-Semitic notes which form *the* recurring motif throughout the film).

As Ritchie Robertson has argued, a disturbing development in much postwar German literature has been the tendency to depict Jewish characters as anonymous and – metaphorically speaking – *invisible* figures, via a process of de-individualisation.<sup>31</sup> Such a process furthermore reflects a disturbing shift in postwar German society overall, not from a denial of complicity and responsibility to an acceptance of the past and the beginning of a belated process of empathy with Jews as victims of the Holocaust, but from the perception of German-as-perpetrators to Germans-as-resistors,<sup>32</sup> and finally to Germans-(themselves-)as-victims. In her provocative essay on the representation of Jews in the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder – a director who certainly did not shy away from portraying Jewish characters in his films – Gertrud Koch claims for



instance that Jews serve as nothing more than a mere foil for the sufferings of Fassbinder's non-Jewish protagonists. Taking such films as *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden/In a Year With Thirteen Moons* (1978, West Germany), *Die Ehe der Maria Braun/The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1979, West Germany), *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1980, Italy/West Germany), *Lili Marleen* (1981, West Germany) and *Veronika Voss* (1982, West Germany) as illustrations of her argument, Koch contends that although Jews are not portrayed as mere helpless victims, in Fassbinder's oeuvre they are nevertheless presented as abstract, almost metaphysical beings. "[U]ntouchable, cold, aloof, unattainable, unapproachable" and "arrogant", they are far removed from and seemingly immune to the earthly torments of the flesh endured by Fassbinder's other, non-Jewish characters:

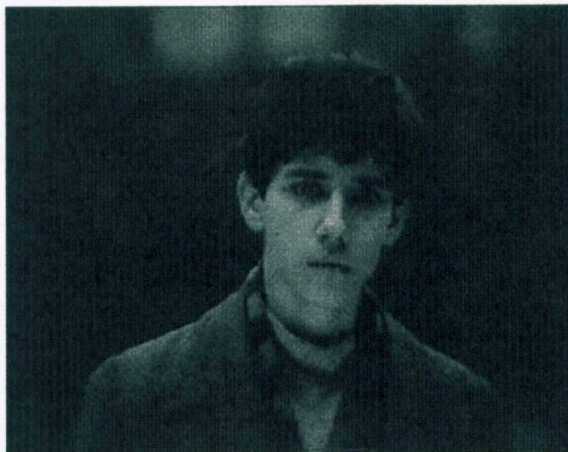
In Fassbinder's work Jews are not wanton, rich, seductive, power-hungry or amoral. But neither are they included among the tormented victims, oppressed minorities, and suffering creatures like many of Fassbinder's characters. They could be called anti-figures, almost abstract... Although Fassbinder never makes use of malicious anti-Semitic clichés in his films, there lies at the root of his creation an anti-Semitic motif, which often manifests itself in the form of a philo-Semitic stereotype: the picture of the Jew as the strict patriarch and man of intellect, law-abiding and austere... At the same time, they function as a screen for the projection of a narcissistic yearning for love as in *In a Year With Thirteen Moons*. The displacement and repression of suffering and sacrifice is absorbed into a cosmos of physical self-mutilation, in which the Jews are allotted the ambivalent role of judges over life and death.<sup>33</sup>

Providing several revealing analyses of Jewish characters from Fassbinder's works – perhaps most compellingly, the figure of Nachum from *Berlin Alexanderplatz* – Koch argues that amidst these dispassionate and highly generalised representations of 'Jewishness', there is little if any room left for empathy with Jews as victims, at least of physical suffering, unaffected as they seem to be by the worries and pain of the corporal world.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, as Bartov has observed, the most troubling aspect of this desire to render Jewishness as ever more abstract and inscrutable, as a means of suppressing the painful memories of the past and prioritising self-empathy, is that on a psychological level it seems worryingly similar to the attempt made by the Nazis fifty years earlier, to physically exterminate Jewish 'difference' from German society:

[O]ne is hard put to think of any German film or work of fiction devoted to the Jewish experience of genocide... While not absent, the victims remain anonymous and faceless; the evil, whatever the causes attributed to it, is in the deed (and its effects on the perpetrators), not in the application to individual human beings. This is a type of representation not unrelated to the Nazis' own perception and representation of the victims as constituting targets for their actions totally lacking individual identity.<sup>35</sup>

As Bartov argues, "empathy begins with the self and is therefore deeply rooted in a narcissistic view of the world". The gradual effacement or displacement of the victims of the Holocaust (not only Jews of course), is hence "a crucial precondition for the representation of German victimhood".<sup>36</sup> Their presence is a "fundamental obstruction to self-empathy".<sup>37</sup> It is films such as *Hitler – A Film From Germany* and *Heimat* therefore, which have prompted scholars such as Santner to observe that "Jews are being displaced by the event of their own destruction...[they are] no longer available as the signifier of ruptures and disturbances one would like to banish from the inside (of the self, the family, the city, the *Reich*)...the Holocaust now figures as the placeholder for the decenteredness and instability experienced as so painfully chronic in contemporary German society...".<sup>38</sup>

The Holocaust and any images of Jewish victimisation associated with it are also notable by their absence in Saless's film. As Hans struggles to survive in his racist neighbourhood, all the major events of the Jewish genocide significantly occur off-screen. Reasons for this could of course include simple budgetary constraints, or strict adherence to the film's source material, rather than a desire to completely efface any images of Jewish persecution from the film altogether. Saless however, in keeping with his previous films, once again problematises straightforward identification with his protagonist, not through the use of long shots and long takes, but paradoxically by means of a basic technique traditionally used in cinema to provoke empathy in the viewer: the close-up. Indeed, the film is full of prolonged close-ups of Hans's blank, expressionless face, in which he displays no intelligible emotion or reaction to the events occurring around him whatsoever. The scene in which Hans goes to the munitions factory where his mother works, to discover the foreman attempting to rape his mother (in a scene reminiscent of the closing moments of *A Time of Maturity*), is perhaps the most striking example of this distancing technique. A long shot of Hans initially shows him entering and crossing the yard of the factory, his attention drawn to the sounds of his mother shouting at the foreman to stop. A close-up of Hans's face then shows him gazing off-screen to his left, whereupon there is a cut to a point-of-view-shot of the foreman forcing himself upon Eva. In the second shot of Hans that follows – a frontal medium close-up (fig. 12) – he merely continues to stare vacantly into the



**Figure 12**

camera at the scene unfolding before him. The use of frontal a close-up here is particularly striking, emphasising as it does the utter emptiness and stillness of Hans's expression as he moves slowly forward, gradually filling up more of the frame. Eventually Eva notices Hans's presence, and the foreman desists and leaves, while Hans helps his mother to her

feet. But Hans's apparent lack of emotion and his unresponsive reaction to the scene leaves the viewer with the uneasy question of just how much longer he would have continued to watch impassively before his mother saw him. Other prolonged close-ups of Hans's face, such as those that show Hans lying in bed between his mother and grandmother, during which he learns important details about his mother and father's past, are also characterised by their emotional emptiness, and only serve to render his true feelings even more unreadable. Even Martin Pasko's stilted performance and his mannered, dispassionate delivery of his lines appear intended to alienate the viewer. At certain points in the narrative it even seems misleading to describe Hans as a 'protagonist' at all. For as Andrew Klevan explains: "Protagonists in most narrative films tend to disturb order or act to resolve disruption: this is what lends films their drive, as the protagonist either disrupts or searches for solutions to situations."<sup>39</sup>

Hans by contrast, rather than being the force that drives the narrative forward (although he certainly becomes more forceful and defiant towards the end of the film), instead wanders aimlessly around the streets of his neighbourhood, and glides through the first half of the film seemingly unfazed by the racist taunts of his neighbours and the destruction caused by the frequent air-raid bombings. On the one hand Saless and Pasko's unemotional depiction of Hans may seem to be yet merely another addition to a long line of insensitive, morally suspect portrayals of Jewish characters in German cinema, and as wholly inappropriate given the delicate and provocative nature of the film's subject matter. On the other hand, Saless's minimalist style once again works strategically to prevent the film from lapsing into an overwrought, emotionally manipulative tale of one boy's struggle to survive in Nazi Germany. As Annette Insdorf has noted

for example, many Holocaust films have, somewhat crudely, "[yoked] childhood and Judaism together to express weakness and victimization."<sup>40</sup> Rather than facilitating a transferral of victimhood from Jews to Germans (or vice versa) however, Saless's non-representation of the Holocaust and of all the iconography associated with it – combined with his unemotional depiction of Hans – works to avoid fetishizing or dwelling voyeuristically on those bankrupt images of Jewish suffering which have become virtually synonymous with the Holocaust through their circulation and repetition in films and television programs. Michael E. Geisler has certainly noticed the trend in postwar German cinema and television, especially in those films and programs which do not even attempt to recreate the Holocaust diegetically, to recycle familiar images of Jewish suffering, particularly "archival materials, photographs, and flashbacks", to lend themselves an aura of legitimacy and false pathos.

[B]eing relegated to the position of referent and instrumentalized in the interest of narratives whose main concerns lay elsewhere, these sequences and photographs of mass murders and gas chambers, of torture and dehumanisation became part of what Anton Kaes has called the "iconography of the Nazi era": a set of disposable, interchangeable, dehistoricized images that can be inserted into any historical narrative, no matter how trivial, to give it a simulated authenticity and a sense of tragic depth.<sup>41</sup>

In *Hans – A Boy in Germany* however, small acts of humanity and inhumanity stand in for, or replace, those images of oppression and genocide, or of mercy and survival, which would typically be expected from a film taking the experiences of a Jewish character in Nazi Germany as its subject matter, especially in a post-*Holocaust* (Marvin J. Chomsky, 1978, USA) context.<sup>42</sup> In one scene for example, the sadistic Nazi officer Martin White (Hans Sander) marches a group of prisoners (whether they are Jews or POWs is unclear) through the streets outside Hans's home. As Hans watches the prisoners, he notices Peter Schwab (Ulrich von Bock), the kindly shopkeeper who Hans refers to as "Uncle Peter", handing out slices of bread surreptitiously to the men as they march by. Saless's method of revealing Peter's kindness towards the men is particularly effective in its understatedness and restraint. A medium close-up of Peter – a point-of-view shot from Hans's perspective – shows him watching the men as they pass him by in the foreground of the shot, intermittently blocking Hans's view of Peter as they do so. When the last Nazi officer has finally passed Peter by, the camera pans down slightly, seemingly arbitrarily, to catch sight of Peter hurriedly reaching into his pocket and handing slices of bread to the prisoners





Figure 13

(fig. 13). The sight of the men's bodies moving past the front of the camera and obscuring Hans's view of Peter's actions adds to the feeling of randomness surrounding the shot, giving the sense that Hans and the viewer are catching a brief glimpse of humanity amidst the scenes of persecution. In another scene, during his flight from home, Hans tries to give

some water to a carriage full of prisoners who are being transported by train, only to be stopped by a Nazi soldier, who kicks over the bucket of water he was carrying. Saless on this occasion employs a frontal long shot – which shows the soldier glaring down at Hans as he casually kicks over the bucket of water with his foot – to emphasise the deliberate, detached nature of his cruelty. In both of the above scenes, minor, understated acts of compassion and brutality – the passing out of bread, the denial of water – take the place of those easy-to-hand and emotionally provocative images of Jewish victimization recycled endlessly by so many films and television programs before them.

It is significant therefore, that only after the end of the war does the *mise-en-scène* of Saless's film begin to resemble that of a Holocaust film, the grim young offenders institute in which Hans is interned – for impersonating an American soldier over the telephone – seeming to resemble very strongly a concentration camp of sorts. In one scene, set in the refectory where Hans eats with his fellow inmates, the camera pans slowly across the hall to focus on a guard



Figure 14

reading a newspaper ironically entitled 'Die Neue Zeitung' (or 'The New Times'). But as Hans discovers, there is nothing 'new' about postwar Germany at all. Although the extremely clumsy characterisation of many of the American soldiers in the film undermines to an extent the parallel the film makes



between wartime and postwar German society and the continuing intolerance Hans encounters, Saless's subtle repetition of certain motifs – or certain patterns of behaviour on the part of specific characters – established earlier in the film, makes clear that the Allied victory brings no liberation of any kind for Hans and his family from the racist abuse they received before the end of the war, or any change in the mindset of the German people and their attitude towards Jews. Hans's girlfriend Nora (Eva Vejmkova) for instance, who is quite clearly differentiated from Hans by her blond hair and her visibly 'Aryan' appearance (fig. 14), and who throughout the film grows noticeably uneasy in Hans's presence and scorns his suggestions that Germany will eventually lose the war, grows ever more distant from him towards the end of the film, refusing to even look at him or speak to him during their last 'conversation', treating him as if he were indeed 'invisible'. Likewise, Hans's racist neighbour, Mrs Marbach, remains steadfast in her prejudice towards Hans and his family. In one striking scene, Hans boldly performs the 'Sieg Heil' salute in front of her as she is hanging her washing out to dry, mocking the racist insults she directed at him earlier in the film. The fact that Mrs Marbach is shown performing such a mundane and everyday task as hanging her clothes on a washing line (fig. 15) is important, as it indicates where the unsettling power of Saless's portrayal of the 'everyday' in *Hans – A Boy in Germany* truly lies; namely, in its



Figure 15

depiction of 'ordinary' Germans, not as unwitting agents of or reluctant participants in the racist policies of the Nazis, but predominantly as willing and complicitous supporters of the violence and hatred perpetrated by their leaders. Hans also continues receive the anti-Semitic notes which are slipped under his front door. Significantly, Hans never discovers who is responsible for the notes. The blame instead is attributed to society as a whole rather than to one specific individual.

In stark contrast to all of his other films however, Saless chooses to conclude *Hans – A Boy in Germany* on a cautious note of optimism, a note that nonetheless does not appear forced or contrived, but seems quite appropriate and suitably ambiguous in its tentativeness and uncertainty. The final image of Hans staring



Figure 16

through the metal bars that cover the window (fig. 16) in his kitchen in defiance of his neighbours is a quietly understated picture of his will and determination to survive.

### **Saless and Kiarostami: the Iranian Connection**

Having considered Saless's émigré works to some degree in relation to other films of the New German Cinema, it is worth examining briefly his ties with the New Iranian Cinema, most notably this cinema's most well-known and acclaimed filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the purpose of this comparison is not only to underline the importance of Saless's works, and the link they represent between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, but also to bring this analysis of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, in some of its various manifestations, in a sense back to where we started, with indigenous Iranian cinema. This circular movement is not intended to insulate or close off Iranian cinema to further discussion however, for indeed this thesis has only just begun to scratch the surface of the complex relationships and various connections between the New Iranian Cinema and its exilic and diasporic counterpart. It is simply meant to reinforce the argument that a better understanding of both the New Iranian Cinema and exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking can be



attained if they are viewed in relation to one another, rather than as two completely distinct entities.

There is nothing remotely 'new' however in suggesting a link between the works of Saleh and Kiarostami. Indeed the similarities will be clear to anyone who as ever had the good fortune to view both a Saleh and a Kiarostami film. It is furthermore a parallel that is made with a relatively fair degree of frequency in much of the literature on the New Iranian Cinema. It is a comparison nonetheless, that never truly extends beyond the superficial. Alberto Elena for instance, observes on several occasions in his recent book on Kiarostami the director's apparent indebtedness to Saleh's seminal film *A Simple Event* (and by extension the indebtedness of fellow Kiarostami disciples such as Jafar Panahi and Bahman Ghobadi). Elena however never really goes into any great detail about the exact nature of the affinities between the works of these two directors. On the one hand this is largely due to Kiarostami's own coyness and notorious reluctance to reveal or acknowledge his own cinematic inspirations. It has always been difficult for instance to gauge the exact extent of the influence filmmakers such as Saleh, as well as the numerous other European directors with whose films Kiarostami's cinema seems to share such an affinity, have had upon Kiarostami (though Kiarostami clearly did intend to pay homage to Saleh with his short never-to-be-made-into-a-film script entitled 'Love and the Wall', set in Germany, and which featured Saleh as the film's main character).<sup>43</sup> On the other hand it may also be due to the fact that the correspondences between a film such as *A Simple Event* and *Where is the Friend's House?* are so visibly apparent, that any attempt at analysing them inevitably runs the risk of overstating the obvious.

There is not sufficient space left in this thesis to trace fully all of the stylistic and thematic parallels between these two films, let alone the entire individual oeuvres of Saleh and Kiarostami. In certain respects moreover, such a detailed and ambitious undertaking is beyond the broad analytical scope of this thesis. What follows nevertheless is a brief comparative overview of the similarities between the works of these two filmmakers (primarily the two films *A Simple Event* and *Where is the Friend's House?*, which are perhaps closest in terms of both style and content). Indeed one of the main aims of this chapter is to propose in an indicative manner, rather than comprehensively or prescriptively delineate, the extent of the affinities between these

two directors, in the process hopefully laying some of the groundwork for possible future, more in-depth studies of the precise nature of these affinities. While I am strongly aware therefore of the potential double standard in criticising the superficial nature of previous comparisons between Saless and Kiarostami, and then performing a mere cursory analysis of the links between these two filmmakers myself, it is my hope that the concise overview of the relationship between the works of Saless and Kiarostami that follows, shall not only serve to illustrate the very similar paths both directors have taken throughout their respective careers, but also touch upon where these two paths begin to diverge from each other. By highlighting the differences as well as the similarities between both filmmakers therefore, and by finally bringing this analysis of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking full circle, this thesis as a whole aims to contribute to the further study of the numerous connections between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora.

Both *A Simple Event* and *Where is the Friend's House?* therefore, take young boys as their central character. Despite the concerns noted by Azadeh Farahmand however in the opening chapter of this thesis, that the portrayals of children in Iranian cinema of the 1970s and early 80s, characterised as they were by a "synthesis of aggressiveness and innocence, the adult world's and the child's, as well as vulnerability and pride", have been replaced by "purified prototypes of children"<sup>44</sup> throughout the 1990s, both boys show tremendous resilience in their respective endeavours. In *A Simple Event* the boy is forced to cope with the death of his mother, while his counterpart in *Where is the Friend's House?* doggedly perseveres until he successfully returns his friend's homework book. Although Ahmad from *Where is the Friend's House?* is clearly a far easier character to identify with overall, by virtue of the concerted action he takes in order to solve the dilemma that confronts him, in addition quite simply to how he speaks and interacts more frequently with the people around him (in contrast to the largely muted and seemingly passive response of the boy in *A Simple Event* to the events unfolding around him), both films align the viewer's perspective with that of their central characters to an equally strong degree. Indeed as the above analysis of Saless's work reveals, the lack of emotion his characters usually display is not generally reflective of the tenderness and care with which Saless portrays them as a director. Whether it can be described as 'humanism' or outright sentimentalism, both

films clearly present their central child characters as thoroughly sympathetic figures. Moreover, both films also embody a critique, if not of absolute totalitarianism per se, then at the very least of authority figures in general, via their respective depictions of their young central characters. In *A Simple Event*, the boy's troubled relationship with his schoolteacher, as well as his own father, is paralleled in *Where is the Friend's House?* by Ahmad's fraught relationship with his equally condescending schoolteacher, as well as the various elders who hinder his efforts to find the house of his friend Mohammed.

It is their respective uses of repetition however, which most clearly links both directors, as well as differentiates them from each other. On the one hand, both Saless and Kiarostami clearly rely upon the device of repetition as a means of structuring the narratives of all their films. This reliance upon repetition can encompass many aspects of the filmmaking process, from the use of particular shots and shot duration, to dialogue and the use of music. More often than not, this repetition serves to give their films a similarly rounded, circular feel, which can be seen as contributive to the sense of open-endedness and irresolution that characterises the endings of many of their films. As explained above however, Saless's use of repetition is specifically designed to 'shock' the viewer, to surprise the audience with the unexpected occurrence of a traumatic event that interrupts his characters' daily routines and deeply affects their lives. The abruptness with which these traumatic events take place, as well as the particular point at which they occur in the narrative (typically at the very end of the film) has the effect of bringing his films to an abrupt halt, as is the case with *A Time of Maturity* and *Utopia*, though it is not so much the case with a film like *The Willow Tree*, in which the traumatic event in question (a murder) occurs a mere twenty minutes into the film. Although Saless's films therefore are often devised to leave the viewer in a kind of psychological limbo, uncertain as to how these traumatic events will affect his characters' lives, they do also paradoxically provide his films with a narrative 'climax', and hence an abstract sense of closure or finality that is largely absent from Kiarostami's cinema.

Kiarostami's films by contrast often employ repetition to eternally defer and continually confound the viewer's expectations of narrative resolution, pointing to a conclusion that may or may not occur beyond the end of the film in the minds of the audience themselves.



Although the analogies between the works of Saless and Kiarostami may be apparent to many therefore, there exist some important differences that need to be teased out and explored in greater detail, so as to be able to better understand the nature of the connection between these two filmmakers, and by extension the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian émigré filmmaking. Despite these differences, Kiarostami's cinema, and the cinema of the younger generation of Iranian filmmakers such as Babak Payami (who has explicitly credited Saless as one of his major influences),<sup>45</sup> strongly bear the traces of Saless's work, confirming Saless as perhaps *the* key link between these two cinemas, between the past and the future, between Iran and the rest of the world.

### **Between the New Waves**

Saless once remarked in an interview with Naficy that:

I must admit with extreme sadness that I have no nostalgic longing for Iran. When each morning I set foot outside my house, whether it was in Germany, France, Venice, or the Soviet Union – the places where I have lived and made films – I would feel at home, because I had no difficulties. I am essentially not a patriot... I think one's homeland is not one's place of birth, but the country that gives one a place to stay, to work, and to make a living... Germany was my home for a long time.<sup>46</sup>

It is particularly striking that Saless does not express regret over the loss of his homeland as such, but rather over *his own incapacity* to feel the weight of this loss; or in other words, his sadness over not actually feeling sad. His comments betray a lack of sentimentality in the man himself that manifests itself on an aesthetic and thematic level in many of his films. This is not the same however as a lack of emotion, for I find many of Saless's films very moving. It is also striking that despite the sombre and critical nature of his émigré works, Saless refers to Germany as his "home". His outlook is perhaps even more understandable given the similarities between the film industries in Iran and Germany. As Saless himself noted after all, in terms of censorship there was very little to choose between working in Iran and working in Germany: "Censorship does exist here," he observes. "The only difference is in the methods."<sup>47</sup> Indeed it is difficult to imagine such a supremely uncompromising and socially conscious filmmaker as Saless finding it particularly easy to practice his craft anywhere in the world.

In addition to examining the defining characteristics of Saless's cinema therefore, primarily his portrayal of the 'everyday', and the limitations of regarding his works exclusively as examples of exilic and/or diasporic filmmaking, this chapter has aimed to illustrate the ways in which Saless can be regarded as both an Iranian filmmaker *and* a German filmmaker. Suspended between, yet at the same time deeply implicated in the development and history of both the New Iranian Cinema on the one hand and the New German Cinema on the other hand, Saless also represents a powerful link between indigenous post-revolutionary Iranian cinema and Iranian émigré filmmaking. If the typically auteurist understandings of Kiarostami's work, discussed in the opening chapter of this thesis, frequently serve to essentialise and ultimately impoverish his films, closing them off to the multitude of possible interpretations that Kiarostami himself strives to provoke in the viewer, then in Saless's case recognising the director's personal vision as a defining structure running throughout all of his works serves by contrast to *open up* his films to the very kind of alternative readings that defy any attempt to pigeonhole them exclusively as exilic, Iranian, or German. With Saless and Kiarostami nevertheless, this paradox is deeply informed by the way in which both directors and their respective oeuvres have traditionally been conceived of in European and North American film circles, Kiarostami as the quasi-European art cinema director *par excellence*, and Saless as the exiled Iranian filmmaker *par excellence*. Although the question of national cinema cannot simply be reduced to an issue of authorship therefore, authorship remains an absolutely integral factor when considering and attempting to understand the national 'belonging' or cultural 'identity' of any cinema, film, or filmmaker.

It seems appropriate therefore to conclude with a brief analysis of a scene from the Saless film *Addressee Unknown*, in which the wife (Iris von Reppart-Bismarck), who has left her husband (Manfred Zapatka) to begin an affair with a Turkish 'guest worker' (or *Gastarbeiter*), examines a photo of Jewish prisoners in a concentration camp in Nazi Germany. Eventually the faces of the Jewish prisoners are replaced by those of anonymous *Gastarbeitern*, the faces of the latter being superimposed over those of the former. This scene, which draws an explicit parallel between the racist treatment of Jews in Germany during the Second World War, and the racist treatment of the *Gastarbeitern* in contemporary Germany, illustrates perhaps more strongly than any other scene or film in Saless's entire oeuvre, Saless's dual status as a German

filmmaker and an Iranian émigré filmmaker, as an insider and an outsider, as a filmmaker who tackled the most topical and taboo issues in German society, and also the issues which were extremely personal to himself as a foreigner living and working in Germany.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Jonathan Rosenbaum and Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 98.
- <sup>2</sup> See Saeed-Vafa, "Sohrab Shahid Saless: a cinema of exile" in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker, 136-45 (London: National Film Theatre, 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 200.
- <sup>4</sup> Hamid-Reza Sadr, "...and the World Became His: An Exclusive Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless", *Film International* 5, no.3-4 (Spring 1998): 51.
- <sup>5</sup> Naficy, 203-4.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid, 200.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, 206.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid, 205.
- <sup>9</sup> See Ivone Margulies, *Nothing Happens: Chantal Akerman's Hyperrealist Everyday*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 21-41.
- <sup>10</sup> Rey Chow, "Sentimental Returns: On the Uses of the Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai", *New Literary History* 33, no.4 (Autumn 2002): p.639.
- <sup>11</sup> Sohrab Shahid Saless, "Sohrab Shahid Saless and a Private Agony", *Film International* 1, no.4 (Autumn 1993): 60.
- <sup>12</sup> Sadr, 55.
- <sup>13</sup> Sohrab Shahid Saless, "Culture as Hard Currency or: Hollywood in Germany" in *West German Filmmakers on Film: Visions and Voices*, ed. Eric Rentschler, 57 (New York; London: Holmes and Meier Publishers Ltd, 1988).
- <sup>14</sup> Andrew Klevan, *Disclosure of the Everyday: Undramatic Achievement in Narrative Film*, (Trowbridge: Flicks Books, 2000), 1-2.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, 114.
- <sup>16</sup> Bahman Maghsoudlou, "Naderi on Naderi", *International Film and Video Center*, <http://www.ifvc.com/naderi-on-naderi.htm>.
- <sup>17</sup> Klevan, 61.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, 62.
- <sup>19</sup> *Far From Home* was an Iranian-German co-production.
- <sup>20</sup> As Saless has elaborated: "In *Diary of a Lover* the character, who is a continuation of the one from *Time of Maturity* in his utter confusion, finds these four walls of the house to be the perimeter of his world. He's a prisoner escaped from society...Between the house of *Time of Maturity* in which the mother defines the child's world and that of *Diary of a Lover* in which the character enters into a sick, anxious world, the boy has passed through puberty, then he collapses; it's at this point that the house is no longer a place of security." See Mamad Haghighat and Rahgozar, "This Isn't Pessimism: Interview with Sohrab Shahid Saless", trans. Timothy S. Murphy, *Discourse* 21, no.1 (Winter 1999): 179.
- <sup>21</sup> Saeed-Vafa, "Sohrab Shahid Saless: a cinema of exile", 143.
- <sup>22</sup> Margulies, 78.
- <sup>23</sup> Stephen Heath, *Questions of Cinema*, (London: MacMillan, 1981), 167-9.
- <sup>24</sup> Olaf Moller, "Olaf's World: Sohrab Shahid Saless", *Film Comment*, (July-August 2004): 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Margulies, 75.
- <sup>26</sup> Anton Chekhov, "The Willow" in *St. Peter's Day and Other Tales*, intro. and trans. Frances H. Jones (New York: Capricorn Books, 1959), 40.
- <sup>27</sup> Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany*, (Ithaca, New York; London: Cornell University Press, 1990), 112.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid, 147.
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid, 143.
- <sup>30</sup> Omer Bartov, ""Seit die Juden weg sind...". Germany, History, and Representations of Absence" in *A User's Guide to German Cultural Studies*, ed. Scott Denhan, Irene Kacandes and Johnathan Petropoulos, 220 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).
- <sup>31</sup> See Ritchie Robertson, *The German-Jewish Dialogue: An Anthology of Literary Texts – 1749-1993*, ed. Robertson, xxvi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> “Certainly the attempt to redeem the memory of those Germans who had taken incredible personal risks to fight the Nazi terror was a necessary act of redemptive historiography for the young Republic; and neither was it a bad idea to show German youths that there were some positive role models in recent German history and that resistance is possible even under the most repressive political circumstances. The problem is that, until the mid-seventies the preponderance of programs dealing with the resistance was so pronounced that a casual observer might wonder how the regime managed to stay in power with so many Germans engaged in active resistance.” Michael E. Geisler, “The Disposal of Memory: Fascism and the Holocaust on West German Television” in *Framing the Past: The Historiography of German Cinema and Television*, ed. Bruce A. Murray and Christopher J. Wickham, 224-5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992).

<sup>33</sup> Gertrud Koch, “Torments of the Flesh, Coldness of the Spirit: Jewish Figures in the Films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder”, trans. Miriam Hansen and Andy Spencer, in *Perspectives on German Cinema*, ed. Terri Ginsberg and Kristen Moana Thompson, 224 (New York: G. K. Hall; London: Prentice Hall International, 1996).

<sup>34</sup> Note also Thomas Elsaesser’s pertinent question: [H]ow can it be possible in relation to the signifier ‘Jewish’ within a discourse about Germany not to have recourse to the figure of the Other?; from *Fassbinder’s Germany: History Identity Subject*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996) 192.

<sup>35</sup> Bartov, 211-2.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 215-6.

<sup>38</sup> Santner, 52.

<sup>39</sup> Klevan, 172.

<sup>40</sup> Annette Insdorf, *Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p.81.

<sup>41</sup> Geisler, 233.

<sup>42</sup> The American miniseries *Holocaust* (Chomsky, Marvin J., 1978) was broadcast on West German television in 1979. Geisler has written on how the miniseries itself single-handedly sparked a nation-wide public debate about the place of the Holocaust and the rise of fascism in German history, and the regard in which both were held in contemporary German society. See Geisler, 220-6.

<sup>43</sup> See Abbas Kiarostami, ‘Love and the Wall’, *Film International* 6, no.1, (1998): 61-5.

<sup>44</sup> Azadeh Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema” in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, 104 (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Jamsheed Akrami, “Babak Payami on *Secret Ballot*”, <http://www.sonyclassics.com/secretballot/secretballotpressbook.pdf>.

<sup>46</sup> Naficy, 200.

<sup>47</sup> Shahid Saless, “Sohrab Shahid Saless and a Private Agony”, 65.



### **Conclusion: Iranian Cinema in Long Shot.**

This thesis has attempted to paint a broader, more nuanced picture of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, by way of an analysis of how the existence of a diffuse and eclectic Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora challenges the artistic, historical and geographical homogeneity of the New Iranian Cinema. It is the contention of this thesis that a better understanding of both cinemas is attained when they are viewed in relation to each other, rather than as entirely discrete phenomena.

In the opening chapter therefore we examined how the New Iranian Cinema has been received and constructed as a quintessential 'New Wave' art cinema in Europe and North America. It was argued that although many of the analogies drawn between the New Iranian Cinema and European art cinema frequently serve to obfuscate rather than illuminate the political, historical and cultural particularities of the former cinema's gradual yet rapid rise to international prominence, on an aesthetic and thematic level many post-revolutionary Iranian films do indeed invite such comparisons, due to the undeniable similarities they share with their post-WWII European counterparts. At the same time however, many Iranian filmmakers have successfully resisted the attempt by critics, academics and audiences in Europe and North America, to *define* their cinema as just another in a long line of 'New Wave' art cinemas, just as they have successfully resisted the attempt of their own government to determine ideologically the nature of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. Iranian filmmakers have achieved this success through what can perhaps best be described as a strategy of considered open-endedness and polysemy, defying overly deterministic, essentialist readings of their films.

The Iranian émigré filmmakers considered in the second chapter display a markedly similar aversion to being pinned down, or categorically defined. Despite the inherently itinerant and contradictory nature of most Iranian émigré cinema however, this heterogeneous group of filmmakers are capable of being conceived of collectively as constituting an Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, via the gradual, accumulative shift that is discernible in the overall outlook of their works, from a myopic and exclusive focus on the experience of displacement, to a more open and inclusive pan-diasporic perspective. Rather than threatening to debunk and fragment

irretrievably the notion of a culturally identifiable indigenous Iranian cinema however, the existence of a prolific and diverse Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora promises to *expand* not only our knowledge and appreciation of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking, in all its various manifestations, but also our understanding of the concept of national cinema itself more generally, as will be discussed below shortly in greater detail.

Finally, the respective analyses of the New York and German films of Amir Naderi and Sohrab Shahid Saless in chapters three and four highlighted the dangers of consistently imposing an exclusively exilic and/or diasporic reading upon the works of Iranian émigré filmmakers. Despite the manifest differences between Naderi and Saless, in terms of how their émigré works differ (or in Saless's case, do *not* differ) from their Iranian films, both directors similarly defy a strictly exilic and/or diasporic interpretation of their individual oeuvres. Naderi does so by explicitly tackling numerous issues and themes in his films (such as the role or place of women in the city in *A, B, C...Manhattan*), an appreciation of which is by no means entirely dependent upon a primary understanding of Naderi as an Iranian émigré filmmaker. Saless by contrast does so by consistently and visibly refining throughout his German works the artistic vision clearly evident in his first Iranian feature film *A Simple Event*. In this thesis I have chosen to describe this artistic vision as Saless's portrayal of the 'everyday'. As such, Saless represents a vital and perhaps *the* most compelling link between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, serving to bring this overview of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking to an appropriately rounded conclusion. For his influence is discernible not only in the recent works of long-standing Iranian directors such as Abbas Kiarostami, but also in the works of the emerging generation of Iranian filmmakers, some of whom directly acknowledge Saless as an influence on their own filmmaking style. It should be stressed nevertheless that the above analyses of the émigré works of Naderi and Saless are not intended to overlook or undermine the validity of regarding these works as interesting and important examples of exilic and diasporic Iranian filmmaking.

But what, this thesis now goes on to ask, of the very concept of national cinema itself? The limitations of Andrew Higson's initial theorisation of national cinema have already been addressed in chapter one. Subsequent revisions of this theorisation by both Higson and others,

have thus far failed to conceive of a suitably flexible and comprehensive definition of the term, which would be capable of accommodating the inherently deterritorialised understanding of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema that this thesis proposes. What other term therefore can possibly hope to encompass the multi-sited and itinerant nature so much contemporary filmmaking, Iranian *and* non-Iranian, local *and* global, “accented” *and* Hollywood, minority *and* mainstream? The introduction to Kathleen Newman’s essay entitled “National Cinema After Globalization” for instance, on the films *Tangos: The Exiles of Gardel* (Fernando Solanas, 1985, Argentina/France) and *Sur* (Fernando Solanas, 1988, Argentina/France), suggests some interesting possibilities. In the introduction, the editors Manuel Alvarado and Anna M. Lopez – referring to the large number of Latin American filmmakers who went into forced or self-imposed exile during the 60s and 70s – observe that in the case of Chile, this massive migration had an “unexpected side-effect”; namely the creation of a “prolific ‘national’ cinema produced *outside* the boundaries of the nation-state [my emphasis]”.<sup>1</sup> But what exactly makes a film ‘Chilean’ if it is not made in Chile? Or in the case of this thesis, a film ‘Iranian’ if it is not made in Iran? Despite the fact that both of the films considered in Newman’s essay are directed by Fernando Solanas, an Argentinean émigré, this thesis has argued that such questions cannot simply be reduced to a matter of authorship. Or that if they can, then that doing so runs the risk of defining (once again, rather than delineating) the films in question as nothing more than exilic and/or diasporic works. Constantly viewing the works of émigré filmmakers through the potentially distorting prism of displacement precludes and impoverishes more nuanced and alternative interpretations of these works. As this thesis has shown, other factors such as content and form need to be taken into account. Which is not to say for instance, with regard to the formal properties of émigré cinema, that there is anything inherently exilic and/or diasporic about a close-up, or a long shot etc, other than that the use of such devices can certainly be informed by a distinctly exilic and/or diasporic sensibility, in a manner akin to the distinctly ‘Islamic’ sensibility apparent in many films of the New Iranian Cinema. Authorship nevertheless remains an absolutely integral factor in any consideration of émigré cinema. Hence the complexity and ambiguity of a film such as *Nightsongs* for example. Is such a film Iranian, American, Chinese, Iranian-American, Chinese-American, Chinese-Iranian,

Chinese-Iranian-American? It would likewise have been impossible for instance, not to mention misleading, to include the film *House of Sand and Fog* in the analysis of exilic and diasporic Iranian cinema conducted in the second chapter of this thesis, had there not been any Iranians involved in the overall making of the film, outside of the primary creative role of director. Indeed, taken collectively the films considered in chapter two suggest that any understanding of a particular film as being both Iranian and exilic and/or diasporic must be predicated upon the knowledge of some kind of Iranian presence in the overall authoring of the film (in the sense that cinema is a collective medium or art form, and the vast majority of films are 'authored' by many more people than their director). The fact that Alvarado and Lopez's statement serves as a precursor to an essay that focuses on the film *Tangos: The Exiles of Gardel* – which as well as being directed by an Argentinean exile, also portrays the experience of displacement for a group of Argentinean émigrés living in Paris – would perhaps suggest that any effective answer to the question posed above must involve a combination of authorship and content, if not necessarily form. It does not therefore follow however that the Iranian émigré films considered in this thesis can accurately be described as forming an 'extra-national' Iranian cinema. What becomes of those émigré filmmakers, such as Naderi and Saless for example, who do not take the experience of cultural displacement as their subject matter? Excluding them from the group of filmmakers that would otherwise be regarded as making up an extra-national cinema would be to expose the concept of such a cinema to the same kind of criticisms levelled at the "limiting imagination" of national cinema itself. Conversely, it would hardly be sound, theoretically or ethically, to include these filmmakers purely on the basis of their national origins, or even to employ a degree of selectiveness when discussing their films, picking and choosing from their oeuvres those films that most readily offer themselves up to exilic and/or diasporic readings. Indeed there are even more variables to take into account, such as the degree of artistic cooperation and geographical cohesiveness which characterise certain extra-territorial film movements, not to mention the different ways in which different émigré filmmakers may choose to portray their respective experiences of displacement, in spite of any (extra-)national, (pan-) diasporic solidarity they may share with each other. In contrast to much Latin American émigré

filmmaking for instance, Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora is characterised by a distinct lack of collaboration between its creators, as well as the dispersed (rather than geographically concentrated) nature of its make-up.

Positing the term 'extra-national cinema' as some kind of counterpoint to 'national cinema' therefore, in addition to setting up a potentially reductive binary opposition, ultimately risks eliding many of the geographical and cultural differences that may separate the particular group of émigré filmmakers in question. It also risks overlooking the complex interrelationships between this particular group of émigré filmmakers on the one hand, and the indigenous cinema of their adopted homelands or host countries on the other hand. Zuzana M. Pick's suggestion of an "intra-national" cinema implies a more nuanced understanding of these interrelationships, yet at the same seems far too technical a term.<sup>2</sup>

Tim Bergfelder by contrast favours the term 'transnational' as a means of characterising and examining the varied and numerous cinematic exchanges between different European countries throughout the twentieth century and beyond. Indeed the concept of 'transnational cinema' has gained a great deal of currency in film studies recently, seeming as it does to be the logical successor to the outmoded and geographically limited concept of 'national cinema'. Bergfelder for instance, rightly observing that the study of 'European cinema' usually means the study of "discreet" 'national cinemas' *within* Europe, argues that:

Rather than focusing exclusively on separate national formations, a history of European cinema might well begin by exploring the inter-relationship between cultural and geographical centres and margins, and by tracing the migratory movements between these poles. In this context, the various waves of migration into and across Europe, motivated by the two world wars, national policies and ethnic exclusion, and the post-war legacy of colonialism and economic discrepancy between Europe and its others are fundamentally linked to the development of European cinema. Equally important to consider is the facilitating and concentrating function provided throughout European history by metropolitan cities (e.g. Berlin, Paris, London, Vienna), which became focal points and destinations for migrant film-makers at certain historical moments, and which thus transcend their status as purely 'national' locations...national film cultures and migrant perspectives (themselves rarely 'pure') are always locked in a reciprocal process of interaction.<sup>3</sup>

Bergfelder's argument is equally applicable to the study of cinemas outwith Europe, and certainly points toward the need for a more malleable and open-ended understanding of the inherently imbricated nature of the formation and development of most national cinemas. Alastair Phillips's recent work on the cinematic exchanges between the filmmaking metropolises of Paris



and Berlin from 1929-39 is a consummate example of the kind of 'transnational' approach to cinema studies that Bergfelder proposes.<sup>4</sup> Hamid Naficy's understanding of the term 'transnational' by comparison seems far less flexible in nature. As observed above, in his writings on exilic television in Los Angeles, he describes as 'transnational' those programmes imported from the homeland *into* the US. In *An Accented Cinema*, he also describes as 'transnational' those films made by "hyphenated Iranians", which do "not necessarily deal with Iranian issues but instead with universal issues of love and displacement."<sup>5</sup> In Naficy's work, the term 'transnational' thus lacks the sense of exchange and bilaterism that it possesses in other contexts.

Although it promises to do away with the stale Hollywood/non-Hollywood binary opposition, the term 'transnational' has I believe connotations of 'transcendence' attached to it that are not necessarily reflective of the situation in which many émigré filmmakers find themselves today on the ground, subject as they often are to the very real geographic pressures of national borders and economic pressures of inadequate funding. Efforts at semantic ingenuity aside therefore, in this respect I find (perhaps somewhat surprisingly given the amorphous nature of the term) Shohini Chaudhuri's recent theorisation of 'world cinema' quite an inviting alternative to traditional concepts on 'national cinema'. Although 'world cinema', as Chaudhuri acknowledges, is frequently employed as a "catch-all term, designating all cinemas around the world, including Hollywood", she interprets it as referring primarily, though not *exclusively*, to "national cinemas outside Hollywood". More significantly, Chaudhuri sees the concept of 'world cinema' as a means of "placing the national *within* regional and global perspectives [my emphasis]", pointing towards not only a way of retaining the concept of national cinema whilst exploring the various cinematic exchanges between different countries all around the world, but also a way of recognising the cultural and economic hegemony of Hollywood cinema without automatically *re-inscribing* it.<sup>6</sup>

In the conclusion to his recent book *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands*, Charles V. Carnegie utilises the religious and philosophical nineteenth-century writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Mirza Hoseyn Ali Nuri), the Iranian-born founder of the Bahai faith, as a means of envisioning a future world community. Carnegie is especially critical of influential nationalist

scholars such as Smith, Gellner, Anderson, and even Hobsbawm, for what he describes as their inability to think beyond the restrictive binary opposition of national sovereignty versus globalisation. The latter force, Carnegie insists, is typically and narrow-mindedly synonymous with increased consumerism, capitalism and Americanisation. The suspicion of any form of 'world community' that such reductive binary thinking entails, claims Carnegie, hinders the realisation of unifying global systems that recognise the fundamental equality between nations, without sacrificing their cultural particularity and diversity.

Scholars who have articulated the ideological contradictions of nationalism as the dominant form of modern community also frequently lament its resilience and the lack of viable alternatives... for most social thinkers, a world culture, if it can be envisaged at all, must consist of little more than spin-offs of from global capitalism... such a hodgepodge of elements lacks the centredness, the historical grounding to have any lasting impact on our most deeply felt sense of identity and belonging. A global culture of this sort has no memory; it is too eclectic a construct to take root in the minds and hearts of the world's peoples... Thus, in spite of widespread acknowledgement of and increasing attention to transnational cultural flows, scholars are generally sceptical about achieving any overarching, hegemonic cultural system... Unity and diversity of culture, then, are viewed as mutually exclusive. Binary thinking persists in spite of calls for its abandonment... We are left with the bleak prognosis that the only likely prospect for anything resembling a global culture would come in the form of an eclectic embrace of consumer capitalism and that such a culture, by definition, spells doom for human cultural variety.<sup>7</sup>

This dystopic outlook, Carnegie goes on to argue, has its basis in the extent to which traditional understandings of nationalism and globalisation are strongly rooted in 'Western' thought and essentialist conceptual frameworks of race, gender and class. Such views claim Carnegie are in stark contrast to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, which envision a world community (that Carnegie does not attempt to depict as inherently utopian) by recognising cultural diversity *through* unity.

Many of the problems Carnegie identifies as detrimental to the realisation of a 'world community' are reflective of the conceptual crossroads at which film studies currently finds itself as an academic discipline. Hesitant to discard fully the seemingly outmoded concept of national cinema on the one hand, for fear of losing sight of the particular historical, social and political contexts out of which most more or less geographically centred cinematic formations emerge, and yet keenly aware of the need for a more wide-ranging and flexible theoretical framework on the other hand, that is more capable of accommodating the increasingly geographically decentred nature of most filmmaking, it is still unclear which direction film studies will take as a whole.

As for this thesis, it does not aim or presume to rehabilitate the concept of 'national cinema'. What seems to me to be far more important however, than endlessly searching for a new term that more effectively and subtly captures the fundamentally deterritorialised nature of most filmmaking, old and contemporary, is the need to carefully yet decisively liberate the term 'national cinema' from the sense of geographical belonging and/or rootedness with which it has traditionally, but by no means exclusively, been associated. What this thesis proposes therefore, is in effect a post-national conception of 'national cinema', one that us enables to think more openly and comprehensively about the ways in which the various forces and discourses that give shape to different national cinemas coalesce and disseminate over given periods of time, in most cases inevitably so. Indeed, as Dimitris Eleftheriotis observes in his recent study of popular European cinemas: "The study of the discursive formation around a national cinema, then, will not strive to discover and impose a coherence and unity where none exists, but to expose both the contradictory aspects of the discourse and how it achieves apparent unity."<sup>8</sup>

Whether or not all of the various manifestations of post-revolutionary Iranian filmmaking considered in this thesis are thus better described and encompassed by the terms 'extra-national', 'intra-national', 'transnational' or 'world cinema', attempts to reconcile the existence of a rich and heterogeneous Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora with the canon of films that are seen to constitute the New Iranian Cinema, exposes many of the problems with the way in which film studies as an academic discipline traditionally imagines its object(s) of study. As I have learnt throughout the course of writing this thesis, these are problems that can never be fully resolved, merely resolved in different ways, for all studies of 'national' cinemas employ a degree of selectiveness as a matter of necessity. It seems prudent and timely however, in light of the more artistically, historically, and geographically extensive panorama of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema that this thesis has attempted to present, to point to the dangers of automatically dubbing the appearance on the international film scene of any and all hitherto 'undiscovered' cinemas as the sudden emergence of some 'new wave'. The New Iranian Cinema has a history after all, a history that needs to be better understood if it is to have any kind of future. For just how much longer can the 'New' Iranian Cinema remain 'new'? Such a question might seem disingenuous.

History has proven that very few national cinemas are capable of sustaining indefinitely the interest of foreign audiences. The decline in popularity of the New Iranian Cinema therefore is perhaps an inevitable and imminent fact. But just how much more time remains until the artistic and cultural relevancy of the New Iranian Cinema is considered no longer worthy of attention by fickle film audiences in the 'West'? The fall in critical standing of both French cinema and German cinema following the decline of each country's so-called 'new wave' movement provides a stark warning for Iranian filmmakers. Certain *auteurs* such as Kiarostami and the Makhmalbafs have undoubtedly cemented their reputations to the extent that their individual careers hinge little upon the larger fate of the New Iranian Cinema itself. But already film studies is witnessing a shift of interest from Middle Eastern to Far Eastern cinema. Although in certain respects therefore Iranian cinema has never been more relevant, since the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, South Korean filmmaking seems to be the designate 'new wave' cinema, the art cinema *par excellence* in-waiting. Consequently, a greater attention to how exactly the New Iranian Cinema came about can only lead to a better understanding of where it is headed, and more importantly, to paraphrase Godfrey Cheshire, to a better appreciation of where it currently is.

### **Postscript: Iranian Cinema after 9/11**

The similarity in response to the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 constitutes another major link between the New Iranian Cinema and Iranian cinema in exile and diaspora, or to be more precise, between two of these respective cinemas foremost directors, Samira Makhmalbaf and Caveh Zahedi. Both directors made contributions to the collaborative film projects *11'09"01 – September 11* (2002, UK/France/Egypt/Japan/Mexico/USA/ Iran) and *Underground Zero* (2002, USA) respectively, films which explore the effects of the terrorist attacks from a number of different perspectives. Whereas *September 11* is comprised of eleven short films by some of the world's most prominent and highly acclaimed auteurs, *Underground Zero* is comprised of eleven short films made by little-known independent US filmmakers. Whereas the films that comprise *September 11* were all shot in 2002, the films that comprise *Underground Zero* were all shot in the weeks immediately following the terrorist attacks on the

World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Whereas Makhmalbaf's film is primarily a work of fiction, Zahedi's film is a documentary-cum-video diary.

Despite these differences, the similarities between both films are startling. Both films for instance are set in a classroom. In Makhmalbaf's film, a young female teacher arrives at an Afghan refugee camp close to the Iran-Afghanistan border, where the inhabitants are frantically trying to make enough bricks to build shelters in preparation for the impending US bombing of their homeland. Zahedi's film is composed of footage he shot during the filmmaking classes he taught at the San Francisco Institute of Art shortly before and after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>.

In both films the teacher occupies an ambiguous position. The teacher in Makhmalbaf's film (fig. 1) unfairly chastises her young pupils for failing to comprehend the enormity of the events that have transpired on the other side of the world in New York City. When she asks if any of her pupils know of the events that she is referring to, some of the children respond by mentioning the rumour that has been circulating prior to class beginning, that two local men may have fallen down a well and died. She also berates them when they fail to observe a minute's silence and instead chatter amongst themselves, debating the concept of a God that would intentionally kill his own creations in a seemingly naïve yet deceptively philosophical discussion. In Zahedi's film, entitled 'The World is a Classroom', conflict breaks out between Zahedi (fig.2) and a young student named Daniel, after the latter refers to Zahedi's somewhat-less-than orthodox teaching methods as "stupid". The power struggle that ensues between Zahedi and Daniel, between the teacher and his student, gradually becomes a metaphor for the wider struggle taking place in the world, as each one tries to constantly impose their will upon the other,



Figure 1



Figure 2



Zahedi trying to throw Daniel out of his class, and Daniel obstinately refusing to leave. It is not entirely clear however in Zahedi's film who is the terrorist and who is the terrorised. If there are any victims, it is the other students who have their classes disrupted as a result of the conflict between their teacher and one of their fellow classmates.

The different methods that both teachers adopt however in order to resolve the dilemmas they find themselves confronted with are radically different. In Makhmalbaf's film, the teacher orders her pupils to go and stand beneath a nearby chimney tower (fig. 3), which she uses as a stand-in for the World Trade Centre, in order to try and more strongly impose upon her pupils the scale of the tragedy that occurred in New York. When one of the pupils sheepishly asks what they should do if they feel the urge to talk, the teacher responds curtly by saying: "Just bite your lips and look at the chimney." The authoritarian attitude of Makhmalbaf's teacher is in stark contrast to Zahedi's more conciliatory approach. After an allegedly hour-long telephone conversation with Daniel, Zahedi reveals that Daniel has agreed to participate fully in his classes once again, and has given his permission to Zahedi to use the footage he shot of their conflict for his short film. All he needed to do, Zahedi explains to the viewer, was simply use the word: "Please". Later, in front of the other students, Zahedi acknowledges that he was also at fault and apologises to Daniel.

Makhmalbaf's film points towards the need for education as an alternative to authoritarianism, by the teacher's very refusal to engage with her pupils and instead force her own will upon them. Zahedi's film by contrast demonstrates the ability of acceptance and

compromise to overcome hatred and confrontation.

Taken together, in a world that has witnessed a renewed demonisation of Iran and Iranians living at home and abroad in the media, it is no mere coincidence that both Samira Makhmalbaf's film and 'The World is a Classroom' constitute impassioned pleas for greater tolerance and understanding.



Figure 3

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Newman, "National Cinema After Globalization: Fernando Solanas's *Sur* and the Exiled Nation" in *Mediating Two Worlds: Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*, ed. Manuel Alvarado and Anna M. Lopez, 243 (British Film Institute, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Zuzana M. Pick, "Chilean Cinema in Exile, 1973-1986" in *New Latin American Cinema: Volume Two – Studies of National Cinemas*, ed. Michael T. Martin, 439 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Tim Bergfelder, 'National, transnational or supranational cinema? Rethinking European film studies', *Media, Culture, Society* 27, no.3 (2005): 320.

<sup>4</sup> Alistair Phillips, *City of Darkness, City of Light: Émigré Filmmakers in Paris 1929-1939*, (Amsterdam University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Shohini Chaudhuri, *Contemporary World Cinema: Europe, The Middle East, East Asia and South Asia* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Charles V. Carnegie, *Postnationalism Prefigured: Caribbean Borderlands* (New Brunswick, New Jersey; London: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 191-2.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitris Eleftheriotis, *Popular Cinemas of Europe: Studies of Texts, Contexts and Frameworks*, (London, New York: Continuum, 2001), 35-6.

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## Filmography

- *10* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002, Iran/France/USA)
- *11'09"01 – 11 September* ('Iran' segment, Samira Makhmalbaf, 2002, UK/France/Egypt/Japan/Mexico/USA/ Iran)
- *400 Blows, The/Les quatre cents coups* (François Truffaut, 1959, France)
- *A, B, C...Manhattan* (Amir Naderi, 1997, USA)
- *Addressee Unknown/Empfänger Unbekannt* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1983, West Germany)
- *All Hell Let Loose /Hus i Helvete* (Susan Taslimi, 2002, Sweden)
- *America So Beautiful* (Babak Shokrian, 2001, USA)
- *Apple, The/Sib* (Samira Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/France)
- *Baran* (Majid Majidi, 2001, Iran)
- *Bashu, the Little Stranger/Bashu, Gharibeh-ye Kuchak* (Bahram Beyza'i, 1988, Iran)
- *Bathtub of the World, In the* (Caveh Zahedi, 2001, USA)
- *Before the Storm/Före Stormen* (Reza Parsa, 2000, Sweden)
- *Bread and Alley/Nan va Kucheh* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1970, Iran)
- *Close Up>Nama-ye Nazdik* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1989, Iran)
- *Colour of Paradise, The/Rang-e Khoda* (Majid Majidi, 1999, Iran)
- *Dash Akol* (Masoud Kimia'i, 1971, Iran)
- *Day of the Jackal, The* (Fred Zinnemann, 1973, UK/France)
- *Diary of a Lover/Tagebuch eines Liebenden*, (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1977, West Germany)
- *Djomeh* (Hassan Yektapaneh, 2000, Iran/France)
- *Driver, The* (Walter Hill, 1978, USA)
- *Far From Home/In Der Fremde aka Dar Ghorbat* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1975, West Germany/Iran)
- *Five* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2005, Iran/Japan/France)
- *Girl in the Sneakers, The/Dokhtari ba Kafsh-haye Katani* (Rassul Sadr-Ameli, 1999, Iran)
- *Guests of the Hotel Astoria* (Reza Allahmehzadeh, 1989, USA/Netherlands)
- *Hans – A Boy in Germany/Hans – Ein Junge in Deutschland*, (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1985, West Germany)
- *Heimat – a German Chronicle/Heimat – eine Deutsche Chronik* (Edgar Reitz, 1984, West Germany)
- *Hitler – A Film From Germany/Hitler – ein Film aus Deutschland* (Hans Jürgen Syberberg, 1978, West Germany/UK/ France)
- *House is Black, The/Khaneh Siah Ast* (Farough Farrokhzad, 1963, Iran)
- *House of Sand and Fog, The* (Vadim Perelman, 2003, USA)
- *I Don't Hate Las Vegas Anymore* (Caveh Zahedi, 1994, USA)
- *I'm Taraneh, 15/Man, Taraneh, Panzdah Sal Daram* (Rassul Sadr-Ameli, 2001, Iran)
- *Iran is Home* (Fariborz David Diaan, 2003, USA/Iran)
- *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Chantal Akerman, 1975, Belgium/France)
- *Just Another Girl on the I. R. T.* (Leslie Harris, 1992, USA)
- *Letter From An Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948, USA)
- *Life and Nothing More aka And Life Goes On.../Zendegi va digar Hich* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1991, Iran)
- *Little Stiff, A* (Caveh Zahedi, 1994)
- *Lizard, The/Marmulak* (Kamal Tabrizi, 2004, Iran)
- *Marathon* (Amir Naderi, 2000, USA)
- *Maryam* (Ramin Serry, 2000, USA)
- *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973, USA)



- *Meeting Evil* (Reza Parsa, 2002, Sweden)
- *Mission, The* (Parviz Sayyad, 1983, USA/West Germany)
- *Moment of Innocence, A aka Bread and Vase/Nan va Goldun* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1996, Iran/France)
- *Mood For Love, In the/Fa yeung nin wa* (Wong Kar Wai, 2000, Hong Kong/France/Thailand)
- *Never aka Border/Gränsen* (Reza Parsa, 1995, Sweden)
- *News From Home* (Chantal Akerman, 1977, France/Belgium/West Germany)
- *Nightsongs* (Marva Nabili, 1984, USA)
- *Order/Ordnung* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1980, West Germany)
- *Prince Etehab/Shazdeh Etehab* (Bahman Farmanara, 1974, Iran)
- *Road Home, The/Wo de fu qin mu qin* (Zhang Yimou, 2000, China)
- *Report, The/Gozarash* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1978, Iran)
- *Roses for Africa/Rüsen für Afrika* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1991, Germany)
- *Rhythm Thief* (Matthew Harrison, 1994, USA)
- *Runner, The/Davandeh* (Amir Naderi, 1985, Iran)
- *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977, USA)
- *Saless, Far From Home* (Mehmaz Saeed-Vafa, 1998, USA)
- *Silence, The/Sokut* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1998, Iran/Tajikistan/France)
- *Simple Event, A/Yek Ettefaq-e Sadeh* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1973, Iran)
- *Still Life/Tab'ate Bijan* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1974, Iran)
- *Taste of Cherry/Ta'm-e Gilas* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1997, Iran/France)
- *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976, USA)
- *Through the Olive Trees/ Zir-e Derakhtan Zeytun* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1994, Iran/France)
- *Time for Drunken Horses, A/Zamani baraye Masti Ashba* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2000, Iran)
- *Time of Maturity, A/Reifezeit*, (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1976, West Germany)
- *Turtles Can Fly/Lakposht-ha ham Parvaz Mikonand* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2004, Iran/France/Iraq)
- *Wind Will Carry Us, The /Bad Ma ra Khahad Bord* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1999, Iran/France)
- *Under the Skin of City/Zir-e Poost-e Shar* (Rakhsan Bani-Etemad, 2001, Iran)
- *Underground Zero* ('The World is a Classroom' segment, Caveh Zahedi, 2002)
- *Utopia* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1983, West Germany)
- *Walls of Sand* (Erica Jordan, 1994, USA)
- *Water, Wind and Dust/Ab, Khak va Bad* (Amir Naderi, 1988, Iran)
- *Where Is the Friend's House?/Khaneh-ye Dust Kojast?* (Abbas Kiarostami, 1987, Iran)
- *White Balloon, The/Badkonak-e Sefid* (Jafar Panahi, 1995, Iran)
- *Willow Tree, The/Der Weidenbaum* (Sohrab Shahid Saless, 1983, West Germany)
- *Women's Prison/Zedan-e Zanan* (Manijeh Hekmat, 2001, Iran)